

桜庭一樹

Kazuki Sakuraba

GOSICK

—ゴシック— 仮面舞踏会の夜

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角川ビーンズ文庫







黒煙が上がり、黒い巨大な舌のように「弥」をなめた。
列車が咆哮した。汽笛が激しく鳴った。

「弥は、屋根から車内に思い切り飛び込む。」

そこに——、ヴィクトリカがいた。

「からだごと、そばにいて守らなくちゃ。離れるときは、死ぬときだ。
ただ、ぼくはあの子のそばにいたいんだ……」

「弥は唇を強く噛んだ。」

「ねえ、あの女の子が落とした赤い箱、見ただろ？
あれ——形見箱ってなんだろう？」

一弥は聞いた。

ヴィクトリカは、耳を澄ます。

〈死者〉はゆっくりと語る。

「形見箱ってのは、つまりそいつの人生そのものさ。

生まれたときに、箱をひとつつくり、

そこに自分の歴史そのものを入れていくんだ」

ヴィクトリカはつぶやく。

「混沌だな——」





ウィクトリカ・プロフ

毒物・甘いお菓子・フリルを愛する、謎多き天才美少女。図書館塔最上階で膨大な毒物を読むのが日課。

久城 一弥

極東の島国よりソヴニール王国に留学してきた、心優しい優等生。毒物で正義感に溢れた、重人一家の三男。



グレヴィール・ド・プロフ

ウィクトリカの異母兄で、地元警察署警部。色男だが、普段はなぜかドリルのような奇怪な髪型をしている。



アプリル・ブラッドリー

英国から学園に留学してきた怪談好きの美少女。冒険家サー・ブラッドリーの孫娘。



セシル先生

一弥とウィクトリカのクラス担任教師。大きな丸眼鏡が印象的な童話の女性。

CHARACTERS

コルデリア・ギャロ ウィクトリカの実母。

ブライアン・ロスコー 謎の人物で毒術師。

ジュピター・ロジェ
ソヴニール王国科学アカデミーの主宰者。

アルベール・ド・プロフ
侯爵。ウィクトリカの父。

ブリタニア・ガブリエル
〈公妃〉を名乗る、オールド・マスカレード号の乗客。

謎の少女
〈孤児〉を名乗る、オールド・マスカレード号の乗客。

キデオン・レグランド
〈木こり〉を名乗る、オールド・マスカレード号の乗客。

サム・オネール
〈死者〉を名乗る、オールド・マスカレード号の乗客。

イラスト：武田日向

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After the full moon had come up, Hansel took his little sister by the hand. They followed the pebbles that glistened there like newly-minted coins, showing them the way.

—*The Brothers Grimm*, Hansel and Gretel

Part I: The Masquerade Ball

A Strange Tale About the Dead, the Lumberjack, the Orphan, and the Empress of Britannia.

The Old Masquerade sped on through the stormy night.

Outside the window of the compartment, with its exquisite scrolledwork ornaments, was a deep-black Baltic Sea, deeper than darkness. Black waves splashed on the surface, their menacing roars threatening the train as it rocked and tore through the night.

Every flash of lightning, every clap of thunder, the Old Masquerade shuddered like a nervous rat.

In a compartment of this crowded train...

“Hold on, Victorique. Let me wipe your nose.”

“Quit your nagging, Kujou. How about instead of rubbing people’s faces, you pray quietly in the corner? I don’t know what religion you follow, though.”

“Buddhism, of course. And I’m not rubbing your face, I’m wiping it. Lift your chin up a little.”

Victorique grudgingly lifted her tiny, elegant chin just a little. Her escort, Kazuya, was wearing a terribly serious look, like a man captivated by a *Daruma* doll, as he moved the silk handkerchief toward Victorique’s face.

Wiping the faint grit from the side of her small, pretty nose, Kazuya smiled. “There. All good.”

“I can handle myself,” Victorique huffed.

“Where’s my thank you?”

“Hmph.”

Victorique turned her face away. The bottom of her elegant red dress, made of layers of torchon lace, swayed. Her dazzling golden hair hung over her dress to the floor like an untied silk turban. A red mini hat adorned with lovely rose corsages sat on her small head, tied around her chin with a satin ribbon. She wore pointy, silver boots.

But her beautiful, aristocratic features, reminiscent of a lovely porcelain doll, and her deep green eyes, looked unhappy, her rosy cheeks puffed up considerably.

“What is it?” Kazuya asked softly as you would your little sister.
“Something wrong?”

“A little dirt will not degrade my intellect,” Victorique declared proudly.

“You’re so full of yourself, you know that? Oh, no. Your intellect’s degrading again.”

He removed a tiny seashell attached to her mini hat. Victorique puffed her rosy cheeks again like a squirrel whose mouth was full of nuts. She kept her frown for a while, until eventually she grew tired of it and wore her usual expression, a strange melancholy glinting in her deep, green eyes, like someone who’d lived for decades.

“The crisis has passed,” Kazuya said.

Victorique groaned.

“Hmm? Are you sleepy?”

“Ahuh...”

“Go to sleep, then. I’ll stay up and keep an eye out. Protect your intellect.”

“Very well. Make sure to keep your eyes peeled.”

As soon as Victorique rubbed her eyes with her tiny, pudgy hands, she curled up like a kitten and rested her head on Kazuya’s shoulder. He could hear her soft breaths. Kazuya sat up straight like the son of a strict imperial soldier, a posture drilled into him by his father by putting a ruler on his back since he was young. He stared straight ahead, and if not for his charming face, he would have looked tough and hard-edged. But as he thought about his little friend leaning on his shoulder, a gentle smile appeared on his serious face.

Snore.

The train sped on through the dark, stormy night.

Kazuya Kujou was on board the Old Masquerade in order to bring back his dear friend, the Wellspring of Wisdom, Victorique de Blois, who disappeared from St. Marguerite Academy at the end of summer vacation. Victorique had been locked up by her father, Marquis Albert de Blois, in the ominous monastery Beelzebub’s Skull on the Baltic Sea coast.

Two forces were clashing in the Kingdom of Sauville: Marquis de Blois' Ministry of the Occult, which aimed to strengthen the country's power through the use of strange powers passed down in the Old World, and Jupiter Roger's Academy of Science, which sought to pave the way to the future through the power of science. At the monastery, Victorique identified the Ministry's assassination of an Academy spy. She also explained the mysterious event that occurred ten years ago during the Great War. After escaping safely from the submerging monastery, they boarded the Old Masquerade, and were now on their way back to St. Marguerite Academy.

The compartment was filled with silence. Sitting straight in the room was an earnest oriental boy, with a small, hauntingly beautiful, blonde girl in an elegant dress leaning on his shoulder, sleeping. Across from them sat two women in silence. One was a girl of about seventeen or eighteen with blue eyes and black hair cut straight around her shoulders, clothed in what seemed like a school uniform, a white blouse and plaid skirt. She had been staring out the window for some time with a brooding face, muttering to herself. The other was a middle-aged woman, with brown hair swept back and wearing a high-neck blouse and a long skirt. She wore no make-up and had a relaxed aura about her. She had been staring at Victorique and Kazuya with interest for a while. When her eyes met Kazuya's, she smiled at him. Kazuya nodded shyly, pulling his chin back a little.

Victorique's soft breaths echoed in Kazuya's ear. He glanced at his friend's face.

She was wrapped in a bundle of red torchon laces, a mini hat with a rose corsage, and gleaming silver boots. Her eyes were closed at the moment, and her incredibly long golden eyelashes flickered faintly with each breath, indicating that she was not an intricate doll, but a living, breathing girl. On her tiny finger shone a dark purple ring, given to her by her dear mother, Cordelia Gallo, a beautiful and bewitching golden mother wolf, at the monastery. Victorique was clutching the ring preciously as though afraid to lose it.

The older woman's gaze darted between them for a while. She, together with the dark-haired girl next to her, pulled them up onto the train right before the waves could swallow them. They also listened to Victorique's brilliant deduction a little later.

The lady tried to speak to Kazuya several times, but when she glanced at Victorique, she just smiled and closed her mouth, not wanting to wake her up.

A while later, Victorique woke up. She groaned as she rubbed her eyes with her tiny hand. Her eyes fell on the newspaper on the floor. Her Wellspring of Wisdom must be getting bored with nothing to read. Kazuya also studied the newspaper. The front page featured a story about the murder in London of a wealthy man who owned a coal mine. Next to it was a small article about the disappearance of Miss Legrant, a seventeen-year-old student in Saubreme. Miss Legrant was described as having waist-length black hair and a quiet personality. Her family was concerned about her safety.

A sinister black spider crawled across the gray newspaper, black-and-white striped legs scuttling past the article on Miss Legrant.

The gloomy girl was still staring out the window and muttering to herself. Her black hair, cut straight around her shoulders, stirred every time the train shook, as though it had a life on its own. The bottom of her black-and-white plaid skirt was a little dirty. Perhaps she had not changed it for a while.

The lady looked at the girl with concern. “I wonder where Miss Legrant went,” she said, trying her best to sound cheerful. “Her family must be worried sick.”

“Yeah,” Kazuya responded.

“Word on the street is that the murdered tycoon was actually on the verge of bankruptcy.” Despite the dark topic, the lady shared some societal gossip in a cheery tone. Kazuya humored her with short responses, and eventually the mood seemed to lighten up.

“Um, may I introduce myself?” the lady asked reservedly.

“Of course.” Kazuya nodded.

The lady smiled. “My name is Britannia Gabri—”

The door to the compartment flung open. The girl gave a start and lifted her head up.

A bearded man of about thirty, with a body as big as a hill, stood there. He was wearing a sturdy leather vest and dirt-stained boots. His hands were burly, and he gave the impression of a laborer. Behind him was another man of about twenty, good-looking and dressed stylishly like the son of an

aristocrat. He glanced at Kazuya and frowned faintly, surprised to see an oriental boy.

“Oh, there’s people here too,” he muttered.

“Oh, well. Let’s just sit in the corridor, then,” said the burly man. “I brought playing cards with me.”

They both turned to leave, but the middle-aged woman stopped them.

“There’s some space here if you like.”

“Ah, thank you kindly.”

The large man happily entered the compartment, his beard loosening.

The young man followed after him. “Rough night, huh?” he said, eyeing everyone present with a smile on his face.

“How about we all introduce ourselves?” asked the large man cheerfully. “Oh?” He spotted Victorique, who had been hiding behind Kazuya, looking like a little rose. The young man’s eyes widened as well in surprise.

“My, what a lovely young lady we have here. How old are you?”

“A hundred and fourteen years old,” Victorique said in a low voice, like the calm before a storm.

Kazuya stifled a laugh. Victorique got very grumpy when she was treated like a child.

Both men stared at her blankly, shocked at the husky voice that came from the mouth of a tiny girl as pretty as a bouquet of flowers. There was a forbidding silence.

Thunder roared outside the window. For a brief moment, a flash of lightning illuminated the compartment in a white light.

Blinded by the dazzling light, Kazuya swallowed.

Plop!

There was a sound, too faint to hear after a fierce thunderclap, but it drew everyone’s attention to the floor nonetheless.

A small, red box was lying on the floor.

Kazuya was puzzled. It looked similar to the box that Cordelia Gallo, Victorique’s mother, had taken from the monastery Beelzebub’s Skull. Called a memento box, both the Ministry of the Occult and the Academy of Science had been searching for it. Cordelia said it was an important item that would determine the fate of the country.

A similar red box was on the floor. One of the six people in the compartment—Victorique and Kazuya, a middle-aged woman, a dark-

haired girl, a large bearded man, and an aristocratic-looking young man, jerked.

Kazuya looked around. He couldn't tell which one of them was startled. Every one of them was wearing calm, normal expressions.

"Oops. Didn't mean to drop it."

The dark-haired girl sitting by the window reached down to the floor, picked up the red box, and put it away carefully.

The large man watched the motion closely.

Then he scratched his beard, and said, "Now, then. Let's introduce ourselves, shall we?"

The huge man gleefully looked around the compartment and smiled broadly. Kazuya was reminded of his uncle he used to visit several times a year when he was back in his country. He lived together with his wife in the countryside. They were friendly, outspoken, and asked all sorts of questions. Kazuya sometimes found himself at a loss when dealing with them, but he couldn't really dislike them either.

The cards that the large, burly man had been shuffling fell on the seat. The young man helped pick them up. Scattered among them were cards depicting a grim-faced king, a stern-looking queen, a sinister Jack.

The dark-haired girl sitting gloomily by the window, resting her chin on her hand, glanced at the cards. "Introduce ourselves?" she murmured in annoyance. Before the large man could say any more, she added darkly, "I'm a nobody. An orphan."

"An orphan?" the large man said. "So you don't have a family?"

"Nope."

The large man stepped on the newspaper at his feet. He must have tried to squash the black spider. The article about the missing Miss Legrant was wrinkled, stained by the mud from his boots.

"I don't know my birthday," the girl went on. "That's why I went to that mysterious monastery, to learn about my birthday." Her dark, blue eyes snapped wide open. "If I don't know my birthday, I'd be lost on the road to the underworld when I die!"

Both the large man and the young man shrank back. A stifling, maniacal aura filled the compartment. Only Victorique stared at the girl's face without fear.

The lady studied the Orphan with concern. She then smiled in an effort to dispel the weird atmosphere. She glanced at the large man and the Orphan.

“I suppose it’s my turn,” the lady said, trying to maintain a cheerful tone. “I’m, um... I’m actually an empress. I secretly went to see the show at the monastery. Staying holed up in the castle is boring, so I snuck out.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m currently in disguise. If they find me, I’ll get sent straight back to my country.”

The lady was wearing plain clothes, with no make-up whatsoever. She looked down, smiling shyly.

The large man rubbed his beard, dumbfounded. “You know—”

“I guess I’m next,” said the aristocratic-looking young man. His face looked serious, but his eyes were slightly misty, as though holding himself back from laughing. “Um, as for me... I know! I’m on a journey to find my sister who was captured by the King of the Underworld. I’ve climbed mountains, traveled to various countries. Because the king of the underworld has my sister, I have to do whatever he says. Who knows what he’ll have me do next?”

The Empress flashed a grateful smile, and the young man smiled back. The young man seemed timid and quiet, but he had a kind heart.

“What’s your job?” the Empress asked gently.

The young man thought about it for a moment. “Hmm... Let’s just say I’m a lumberjack. I cross mountains, chopping down trees as I go.”

Watching the young man, the grumpy Orphan’s expression softened a little. The large man regarded the Lumberjack’s face, with its noble features, and his clearly luxurious outfit.

The Orphan, the Empress, and the Lumberjack exchanged smiles.

The large man clicked his tongue, but he wasn’t genuinely angry.

“Fine,” he said, chuckling dryly. “You don’t want to actually introduce yourselves. All these weird names are making me feel like I’m under some evil spell.”

“But I really am an empress traveling discreetly,” the Empress protested with a serious look.

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. We’re just strangers who happened to ride the same train. Some of the guests at the show didn’t mind being seen there, while

others were the opposite. I belong to the former, so I didn't really think about it."

He scratched his beard again. He glanced at his muddy boots and pulled on his humble vest with his craggy hands.

Thunder rumbled again outside. A flash of white light ominously illuminated the inside of the compartment.

"In that case, I'm the Dead," the large man rumbled.

Under the light, his bearded, rugged face was as white as a criminal's head on a silver platter. His bloodshot eyes were frozen in torment, as though he had died a sudden, unexpected death.

"Hundreds of years ago, I was killed in that monastery when the Black Death, a terrible plague, ravaged the lands. I didn't want to die, but I met such a tragic end that my soul couldn't pass on, and for a long time I'd been wandering the dark surface of the Baltic Sea, shedding black tears."

A small, hysteric shriek came from the youth.

The man in the legends, who died at the monastery.

And the Black Masque of Death who killed him.

"For the next centuries, my soul haunted that monastery, cursing all who came to visit," he continued sonorously. "During the Great War, I squealed with delight at the sight of the German fighter planes crashing on the water and the beach. Young German soldiers lost their lives, their charred and dismembered remains strewn among the wreckage."

A curse that had continued since the Middle Ages, echoing through the monastery.

"Curse you. Curse this fortress. Death will come. Over and over."

The malevolent voice of a young, foolish, and narrow-minded king, emanating from the depths of the underworld.

"Unfortunately, none of the dead left behind a satisfactory body. Finally in the midst of tonight's chaos, I found a new, tough cadaver. I'm talking about this man, who came to see the show. He was strong and powerful, but he grew up in the mountains, so he couldn't swim. When he drowned, I slipped into his body and took over. For the first time in centuries, I walked on my own two legs!"

The ominous thunder gradually faded.

Inside the compartment, the flash of light dulled, and dimness returned. The train continued on through the night, rocking unsteadily like a ship in a

storm.

When the large man—the Dead—finished speaking, he eyed everyone with wonder.

The Lumberjack clapped his hands, and the Empress smiled.

“That was amazing!” the Empress said. “Right?”

“Yeah,” the Lumberjack agreed. “The perfect timing of the thunder and lightning played a part, but it was really cool overall. Your story’s the best one.”

“R-Really?” the Dead scratched his beard bashfully. The sinister visage he showed earlier was gone, replaced by a look of both amusement and disappointment. “I must say, it’s like a Masquerade Ball.”

He looked around, gazing into each person’s eyes.

Everyone’s faces turned expressionless as they silently stared back at the large man’s bearded face. Fear made the Dead’s voice grow a little louder. He fanned out the cards in his large hands.

“Don’t you see it? We’re all hiding our true identities, wearing masks like the characters on these cards. The Orphan searching for her birthday, the Empress on a secret trip, the Lumberjack looking for his sister, and the Dead wandering around. They’re not aware of what the others look like.” He scratched his beard absently.

Victorique studied his face intently. Her golden hair hung softly over her lavish red dress. Her mini hat, adorned with roses, looked like a mystic flower blooming in the darkness of the night. The Dead glanced at Victorique and tried to say something casually, but he closed his mouth, stunned by her peculiar beauty.

They were all staring at Victorique, waiting for her to speak. She wasn’t saying anything, so the Dead, his face tensing up, decided to break the silence.

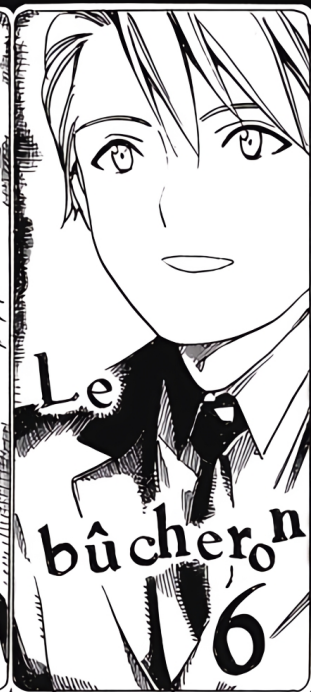
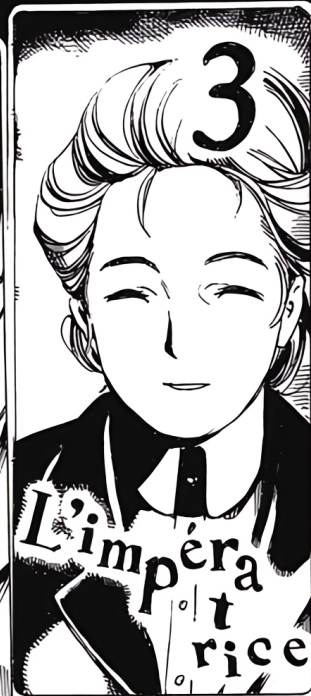
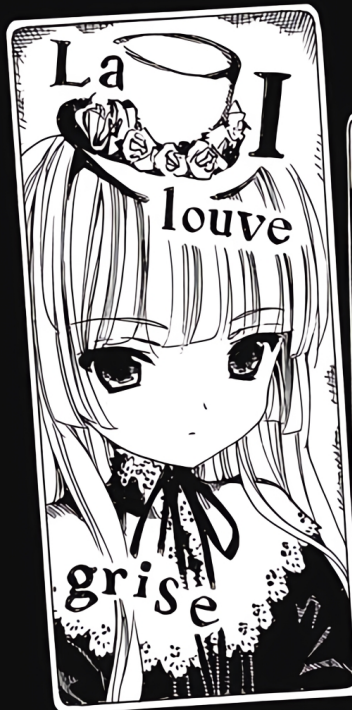
“What about you, little girl?” he asked softly.

“...Hmm?”

“Who are you?”

Victorique’s hazy, green eyes widened slightly. Her lips slowly parted.

“I’m an ancient, proud Gray Wolf, and this is my idiot vassal,” she muttered in a low, husky voice.



Lightning flashed, painting the compartment white. Blazing, yet frighteningly emotionless, green eyes glinted in the brightness, eyes that appeared to see through everything.

The moment she mentioned the words Gray Wolf, Kazuya sensed someone tense up. The same person who flinched before when the Orphan dropped the red box, he thought. But he didn't know who it was. As the thunderclap faded, the atmosphere returned to normal, and everyone relaxed, staring at each other's faces.

"Now wait just a darn minute," Kazuya protested. "The vassal part I can understand, but I am *not* an idiot. I came to Sauville as a representative of my country. I'm tough, and my grades are better than yours. You don't attend classes or take exams, so let me tell you something: you can act all high and mighty, but you're still getting zeroes. Ouch!"

Victorique kicked Kazuya's shin with her boots, silencing him.

The train shook.

"I'm just telling the truth," Kazuya mumbled. "Flunker!"

Victorique tried to say something...

Her small, pretty nose twitched...

Her deep, emerald eyes flickered, and she brought her chubby palms to her cherry lips...

Her quiet, wise, expressionless, impassive visage tensed up just a little...

Achoo!

She let out a weird-sounding sneeze.

Kazuya blinked. Then he quickly pressed his palm on Victorique's tiny, porcelain forehead.

"No fever," he said. "Maybe you're feeling chilly 'cause your dress got wet from the seawater. What? Don't touch me? I'm just a lowly vassal? Well, *sorry*, you egomaniac... Hold up."

"Achoo!"

"There's something off about your sneeze."

"...You're mistaken."

"See? You were a little late in responding. That's what happens when you're a little unsure. You might not realize this, but I do. Hehe. Your vassal knows. Hello?"

"Do you ever stop yapping?" Victorique replied wearily. Her eyes, glazed with fatigue and resignation, widened slightly.

“That’s right. You two should go get changed,” the Empress interjected in a motherly tone.

“You’re absolutely right.” Kazuya nodded, trying to deal with the reluctant Victorique.

“There’s an enemy in our midst!” the Orphan suddenly shouted.

Startled, everyone turned their attention to her. The girl looked around the compartment, her body trembling, her eyes bloodshot.

“I’m gonna get killed before I even learn my birthday,” she said. Her hair was disheveled, her eyes wide with fear. “There’s someone here who wants to kill me!”

The peaceful atmosphere instantly turned sour. The Orphan’s body shook as she sobbed violently. The Empress quickly tried to calm her down.

“It’s all right,” the lady assured. “If anyone is out to get you, it’s not me. Stay close.”

The Lumberjack and the Dead exchanged glances.

The Dead scowled, a little offended. “Looks like there’s someone suspicious among us. Maybe it’s you.”

“You look more suspicious than me,” the Lumberjack rebutted.

“Hngh... I think so too. But it’s not like I chose to be this big.”

The Dead sighed. The Orphan’s hysterical cries filled the compartment. The Lumberjack gave the Dead a troubled shrug.

The Dead stood up. “I talked to the waiters in the dining car,” he told Kazuya. “They have some spare uniforms. Little girl, why don’t you borrow one and get changed before you catch a cold? I’ll ask them.”

“Th-Thank you, sir.” Kazuya rose. He left the compartment with Victorique in tow.

“What a bunch of oddballs,” the Dead spat as he strode along the shadowed corridor. “The Empress clearly looks like your typical, nice wife. And the Lumberjack looks like the son of a noble. Then there’s me, the Dead, despite being tougher than everyone else. What a weird night.”

He sighed as he shuffled the cards in his rugged hands several times. He looked over his shoulder and scratched his beard.

“But now that I think about it, you guys are the weirdest. Two kids coming to the monastery for the show. You clearly look around fourteen or fifteen, and uh...”

He glanced down at Victorique, then looked away as though scared by her beauty. He scratched his beard, thinking.

"I'm a hundred and fourteen years old," Victorique huffed.

"Hmm, okay. Sure. I guess it makes sense, since you're a Gray Wolf," he murmured. "I bet you got that from the story about a village deep in the mountains where terribly smart Gray Wolves live. I know the story well. I heard about it a lot when I was a kid."

Scratching his beard, the Dead resumed walking.

The corridor was crowded with people. When they arrived at the dining car, the Dead casually spoke to a waiter in a black-and-white uniform. The waiter seemed to be friendly; he was chatting affably with the Dead.

"He said you can borrow some uniform," the Dead said, turning around. "You don't want to catch a cold."

"Thank you," Kazuya said.

"You got wet too, didn't you? Here you go."

Kazuya took some men's clothes for himself and a women's apron dress for Victorique, and bowed. As soon as he found a restroom, he immediately changed and told Victorique to change as well.

While Victorique was changing, Kazuya stood in front of the restroom to keep watch. His legs were shoulder-width apart, his hands folded behind him. As he stood there, looking like a young soldier, he heard the rustling of clothes, the unraveling of silk ribbons, and an anxiety-inducing little sneeze coming from inside.

"Are you okay, Victorique?"

"Hmm."

"I'm right here, okay?"

"I know."

More rustling of clothes. Her dress falling to the floor. Boots clattering.

Then there was a soft humming.

"Apron~! It's an apron~!"

Kazuya unknowingly started humming along as well.

"Shut up," Victorique snapped. He closed his mouth.

Since there was no one around, Kazuya asked Victorique about what had been bothering him.

"Hey, Victorique. You saw the red box that the Orphan dropped, right?"

"Ahuh."

“What was that?”

Kazuya had bumped into Cordelia back at the submerged monastery. Born and raised in a nameless village deep in the mountains known as the Village of the Gray Wolves, she was forced to leave her village and became a dancer in Saubreme, where she was found by Marquis de Blois. The Marquis took her captive and locked her in a tower, eventually giving birth to Victorique. Cordelia’s partner, a red-headed man named Brian Roscoe, went to the village and retrieved a memento box hidden under the floor of Cordelia’s house. Ten years ago, he hid it in the monastery.

Cordelia took the memento box from the monastery and left before the others. She said she was going to leave a fake one behind. The actual box was red, tiny, and looked just like the one that the Orphan had dropped earlier.

“I wonder if that was the fake box that Cordelia left behind,” Kazuya said. “But what exactly is a memento box? Cordelia said that it was something extraordinary that the Ministry of the Occult and the Academy of Science are desperately searching for.”

The door to the dining car opened and the Dead returned, looking jolly. His reddish cheeks suggested he had a drink.

“Oh, Vassal,” the man said, tapping Kazuya on the shoulder. “Did you just say memento box? For someone so young, you sure know some ancient words.”

“Ancient words? Wait, do you know about the memento box?”

“Of course. I’m a soul from the distant past, after all. I’m familiar with ancient traditions. I’m just kidding. But that takes me back. I haven’t heard those words since I was a kid.”

Even outside the restroom, Kazuya could hear Victorique’s tiny ears twitching, listening attentively.

“I’ve only heard of the words,” Kazuya said. “What exactly is a memento box?”

“Is that so? Hmm, I suppose that makes sense.” The Dead smiled shyly. “In the village in Eastern Europe where I grew up, they used to make memento boxes. A memento box is a person’s life itself. Only the eldest son of a big family would make one, though. When you’re born, you get a box, and you put your history in it.” His sorrowful voice echoed down the corridor. With a mix of fondness and fear, he continued. “Eventually, the

box fills up. When the box is full, the man's time is up, and a quiet death arrives. Even the most formidable man, even an important head of a clan, doesn't live longer than what the size of the box allows. And when they do, their memento box is placed in the coffin with them."

"I see..."

"So a memento box is a man's life reduced to a tiny box. A very personal myth, if you will. I saw a box when my grandfather died a long time ago, but I didn't know what was in it. It's an ancient custom that no one does nowadays. Old, small, bottomless boxes of life made in ages past, back when life had a deeper meaning."

The Dead laughed, his face red from the alcohol. "I'm heading back." He waved and walked down the corridor.

Kazuya watched him go.

"Chaos," Victorique murmured from inside the restroom.

"Hmm? What's the matter, Victorique?"

"He's an educated man. At least in spirit. What do you think, Kujou? Any comments on his rustic appearance, his clothes? And that hint of intelligence and culture in his voice."

"Now that you mention it. He gives two very distinct impressions."

"The outside doesn't match what's inside. It's almost as if..."

The door to the restroom opened slowly. She was having trouble opening the door with her tiny hands, so Kazuya helped her. Victorique puffed up her little rosy cheeks and put her weight on the door, pushing it as hard as she could.

"It's almost as if a different soul is in the body of the dead!"

The door opened and Victorique stumbled out onto the corridor. The momentum caused her to bump into Kazuya, hitting her forehead on his stomach. Flapping her arms around, she managed to stay on her feet, thanks partly to Kazuya's gentle support. She looked up at him smugly.

Victorique, who had removed her luxurious red outfit and changed into a simple black-and-white apron dress, was dazzling in her natural, spine-chilling beauty, her golden hair cascading down like silken threads. Her green, wise eyes, quiet and serene like those of a long-lived wild beast, twinkled, betraying intelligence, weariness, and something else.

Her golden hair, reminiscent of some wild creature's tail, glittered enticingly, inviting Kazuya's hand to touch it.

It was soft and moist, like heavenly silk.

“Get your hands off me, servant!” Victorique snapped.

“I’m sorry,” Kazuya apologized. “Wait a sec. I’m not your servant. And your hair was just so sparkly, I was overwhelmed with emotions. But I am not anyone’s servant. You better watch your step. Too much arrogance will trip you up.”

Victorique strode off alone, leaving Kazuya to carefully gather up the red extravagant dress—a bundle of torchon lace that she had shed like a molting snake—and her glittering mini hat. Mumbling something under his breath, he followed his friend, the red laces and ruffles blocking his view.

The frills expanded in Kazuya’s arms as they absorbed some air. The hat almost fell off his arm, so he quickly placed it atop his own head so it wouldn’t fall to the floor and get dirty. He was dressed in a black-and-white waiter’s attire, with a red mini hat sitting on his head at an angle. Victorique whirled around with a sullen look on her face, but her cold, green eyes widened a little at the sight of Kazuya.

Her beautiful, yet cold face twisted a little. A smile, perhaps.

“You have a flower on your head.” Victorique chuckled.



“It’s not funny! Man, you’re such a slob. Who did you think would clean up after you?”

“You, of course,” she said dubiously, as though her answer made perfect sense.

Kazuya nodded with a sigh. “I know... I wonder why, though.”

“Because you’re a neat... freak... Hmm?”

Victorique’s tiny, dainty ears twitched. Curious, Kazuya strained his ears as well.

A disturbing, mechanical sound was coming from somewhere.

An eerie voice, drowned out by the roar of the Old Masquerade, reverberating from the underworld, reached Victorique and Kazuya.

“Help... Help me...”

It was the voice of a young woman, pained and filled with sorrow, emanating from the depths of hell. Mixed in with it was the beeping of some kind of machine.

“Brother... Help me, please!”

Victorique and Kazuya glanced at each other.

A nearby door flung open, and a young man with aristocratic features, wearing decent clothes—the Lumberjack—jumped out, as if pushed by an invisible hand. He fell on his knees in the corridor, shoulders shaking, taking deep breaths over and over again.

“Um, are you okay?” Kazuya asked.

The Lumberjack gave a start and looked up.

Grim fear was plastered on his face. His gray eyes were wide open, his thin eyelashes twitched, and his pale lips were stiff, as though frozen in the middle of a scream.

He looked like he had just seen a ghost. Gone was the pleasant, young man from earlier, as if he had aged a hundred years. A chill crawled down Kazuya’s spine, and he stepped in between Victorique and the Lumberjack. Victorique poked her tiny head out from behind and stared at the Lumberjack’s face.

“I, uh...” The Lumberjack hurriedly got up and brushed himself clean. He gave a feeble laugh in an effort to appear calm. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“I thought I heard a voice just now,” Kazuya said.

“A-A voice? I didn’t hear anything. Maybe you heard me talking to myself. This is embarrassing, but I’m not fond of trains. I always get sick when I ride one. I was hiding because I didn’t want anyone seeing me like this. I didn’t expect you youngsters to find me.”

“You don’t like trains?”

“No. When I was a kid, my parents were in a train accident. That’s when I started disliking trains. But I’m okay now.”

The Lumberjack tottered away down the corridor. As he watched him go, Kazuya noticed that Victorique was nowhere to be seen. He looked around and called for her name. He thought he heard a faint reply beyond the open door, a groan, a signal of some sorts.

“Victorique? What are you doing?” He peeked inside.

Victorique looked over her shoulder, finding Kazuya’s face topped with the red mini hat. She snorted.

“Looks like a communications room,” Victorique said.

Kazuya examined the small room. It appeared to be dedicated to communication, with enough space for just one person. Right now, the room was quiet and still.

“You heard it too, right?” Kazuya said. “I don’t think that was my imagination. It didn’t sound like the Lumberjack.”

“Indeed.”

“I heard ‘Brother, help me.’ I wonder what that was about. Speaking of which, he said he was looking for his sister who was kidnapped by the king of the underworld. I thought he was just making it up. There’s also the Dead’s seemingly distinct personalities. Strange night.”

“Ahuh.”

Victorique and Kazuya themselves were a descendant of the legendary Gay Wolves and her kind-hearted attendant.

The train lurched to the right. And then to the left.

The whistle pealed high.

The darkness outside grew thicker. Black clouds drifted by, obscuring the moon, and a lonely, sinister darkness, blanketed the Old Masquerade like a jet-black veil.

Victorique and Kazuya exchanged looks and inclined their heads in the same direction simultaneously. Victorique’s hair cascaded softly to the

floor. The red mini hat on Kazuya's head tilted a little, like a medieval knight's hat.

"This is one awfully weird Masquerade Ball," Kazuya mumbled anxiously. "Like the Dead said, everyone's wearing disguises. But what if it's the same faces behind the masks?"

"One person is definitely lying."

Victorique left the communication room and marched on briskly. Carrying a bundle of red frills, Kazuya scuttled after her.

Night was deepening. It was already midnight.

"I know who you're talking about," Kazuya said. "The Empress, right? I don't think she was telling the truth. She seems like a calm housewife. She was just going along with the girl."

"No," Victorique replied curtly. "It's the Orphan who's lying."

"...What?"

Victorique spun. Her quiet eyes, like those of an ancient creature that had lived for a thousand years, flickered.

Kazuya stared back at her, shocked. "Her?"

"Yes."

"She seemed more serious than the rest, though."

"I believe that was an act. But I don't have enough fragments. Hardly enough. Reconstruction is currently impossible."

"But..."

"I said I don't have enough!" Victorique repeated, her emerald eyes blinking. Her silver boots pattered on the floor as she threw a tantrum, stomping her feet. It went on for a while. The rose mini hat on Kazuya's head shifted to the side some more.

"We're heading back, servant."

"Okay... Um, can you not call me a servant?" Kazuya grumbled as he followed Victorique.

Outside, dark waves rolled on the forbidding, blackened sea.

Back in the compartment, the four guests of the Masquerade Ball were all making themselves at home. The Dead and the Lumberjack were playing cards together, and the Orphan was leaning on the shoulder of the Empress, exhausted, mumbling to herself at times. The Empress was flipping through a women's magazine spread out on her lap, reading intently.

Kazuya studied the Orphan. Her eyes were closed, her face completely fatigued. She didn't seem to be lying. He was watching her for a while, hoping to catch something, when the Empress noticed his gaze and looked at him curiously. Unaware, Kazuya kept his eyes fixed on the Orphan.

Thwack!

Someone slapped him on the face.

Kazuya's eyes fluttered in surprise. Startled by the sound, the others looked at Kazuya.

Standing tiptoe in front of him was Victorique, face red and arms outstretched. The bottom of her black-and-white apron dress swayed, and her silver boots were squished from her tiptoeing. Victorique spread the palms of her chubby hands out wide, and...

Thwack!

Slapped him even harder this time.

"Ouch!"

"Indeed."

"What do you mean, 'indeed'? What's the matter with you? Did I do something wrong? How could you slap a gentleman's face out of nowhere?"

"You want a reason?!"

She opened her mouth to explain, but closed her cherry lips in annoyance. Losing interest, she looked away, then flipped her gaze back to Kazuya.

Slap!

"Ow! What are you doing?! You're hurting me!"

Slap! Slap! Slap!

Using all she got, Victorique, her face turning beet red, slapped his face, neck, and back so hard that Kazuya had to run around the small compartment to dodge her. The Dead, appalled, lifted his head up to say something, but gave up on the idea, and went back to playing cards.

A little while later, the Dead and the Lumberjack got up to have some wine in the dining car. When they left, Victorique put her hands down.

"Phew! That's enough, Kujou," she said, satisfied. "Sit down and relax."

"Relax, my foot! Why are you doing this?!"

"Why? To get rid of the danger, of course." Victorique eyed Kazuya curiously, like she just stated something obvious. She stared at him with

clear, unsuspecting eyes, a smug look on her face.

“Why do you always hit and kick me?” he asked.

“I-I didn’t kick you.”

Victorique’s face dimmed. She cast her eyes down and let her shoulders sag.

“Well, you’re not kicking me now, sure. But why would you hit me out of nowhere? A gentleman’s face should be respected by ladies. But you... If you don’t give me a proper reason, I’ll get angry.”

“...”

“If you have a justifiable reason for what you did, I’m all ears. Come on.”

“Shut up. Whatever.”

Victorique plopped down on the seat with a deep frown. Kazuya sat down next to her, and turned his back.

They remained silent for a while. The train rocked along the tracks. The night was getting deeper, and the Orphan and the Empress sitting across began blinking their eyes drowsily. The magazine fell from the Empress’s lap to the floor.

Kazuya picked it up and gently placed it back on her knees.

He glanced at Victorique. “Hey, where’s your apology?”

Victorique did not reply.

Since she wasn’t moving a muscle, Kazuya wondered if she was asleep. Leaning forward, he gently peeked at the small face hidden by her golden hair.

Tears and sadness filled her green eyes, and her cheeks were red and bulging from having her pride hurt. Her tightly-pursed cherry lips said she was not saying a word no matter what.

“Wh-What’s with the face?” Kazuya asked, perplexed.

No answer. She groaned faintly, but no words came out of her.

“You’re such an enigma. Why are you looking like that? Hello? Victorique?”

She still wasn’t responding, so he poked her on the cheek. There was a groan of protest that sounded like the bark of a wolf pup. Kazuya gave up and propped his chin on his hand.

“Fine. I get it. You’re in a bad mood right now, and you’re mad at me for some reason, but you won’t tell me why. How am I supposed to know what

to do, then? You're such a child."

Victorique's eyes widened a little. Then she turned her head away, ignoring him. Her teary, sorrowful eyes worried Kazuya, but he couldn't do anything about it.

"I'm going to the dining car," he said.

"..."

Victorique glanced at Kazuya's back as he stood up, looking a little sad. But when Kazuya looked back right before he left the compartment, she had turned her head away stubbornly.

Kazuya clicked his tongue.

"See you later, brat."

He closed the door.

Kazuya walked down the corridor of the wobbling train.

A shrill whistle came from behind. The lights were off, and the corridor was shadowy.

The thunderstorm seemed to have gone away. The night was filled with quiet.

"Tsk... Why'd she slap me so hard?" Walking down the dim corridor, Kazuya sighed several times.

The soft, blood-red carpet felt unsettling under his feet. Dimmed orange lamps cast a faint dusky light on Kazuya.

The train sometimes lurched to the right and then to the left. The whistle sounded, long and high, and like the cry of an animal, it trailed off into the darkness of the night.

"Seriously. You can't just go around slapping people without a reason," Kazuya mumbled.

He entered the dining car. People were crowded around tables with glittering white tablecloths. Everywhere on the train was packed with people tonight. A red-faced middle-aged gentleman shouted to Kazuya, who was wearing a waiter's uniform.

"More wine and whisky over here!"

"I'm not a waiter," Kazuya said, quickly scurrying away from the table. "Right. I'm wearing these clothes. My presence is gonna confuse people for sure."

Someone pulled on his arm.

“I’m not... a waiter... Oh, it’s the Dead and the Lumberjack.”

A large, bearded man and an aristocratic-looking young man were seated at a round table with an elaborate design that resembled a lion’s paw, playing cards. Court cards were scattered on the table—grim-faced kings and queens, and sinister jacks in all black. The Dead sat Kazuya down in an empty seat and gulped down a glass of wine.

The train shuddered as it sped along.

The whistle blared high.

The Lumberjack raised his head. “Well, look who’s here.”

Kazuya glanced up. The door to the dining room opened, and the Empress entered with the Orphan. The Lumberjack waved at the two women and motioned them to their side.

“Do you mind if we join you?” the Empress asked with a smile. “I’m wide awake now.”

“Not at all. Please, have a seat.”

“Thank you.”

The Lumberjack shifted the chairs, and the two women sat down at the round table. Glasses were handed out. The three adults drank wine, while Kazuya and the Orphan had water.

Kazuya kept glancing back at the door restlessly. “I’m heading back,” he told the Dead, who was shuffling the cards. “I left my friend behind. If the Empress and Orphan are here, that means she’s alone.”

“She could be asleep. It’s already late.”

“Oh, no, she was awake,” the Empress said. “I invited her to come, but she just shook her head, so we left her there. It looked like she wanted to be alone.”

“I know, but she’s always like that. Also—” Kazuya shut his mouth.

That girl—Victorique de Blois—was tremendously smart, and although she spent her days playing with her brain, reading mountains of books alone, occasionally eating sweets... Although she liked to be alone, in truth, she felt lonely.

By now, Kazuya had a better understanding of his friend Victorique. He wasn’t exactly sure about his conclusion, but he had a feeling that she was more complex and mysterious than the labyrinthine stairs of the library tower—a great mystery.

Kazuya stood up to go check on her. Suddenly, someone grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back to his seat. Kazuya thought that he had been grabbed by the Dead's burly hands, but he saw that he was sitting right in front of him. He was not within arm's reach.

Surprised, he glanced down and saw a thin, pasty hand gripping his arm tight.

It was the Orphan. Her dark, blue eyes flickered, glaring at Kazuya.

"Wh-What is it?" Kazuya asked.

"Don't leave yet. Play a game with us."

"A game?"

The Dead stopped shuffling and regarded the Orphan curiously. "Sounds like a good idea. I was just getting sick of playing cards. Not like I can sleep tonight anyway. Let's try out this game of yours. How is it played?"

The Orphan took a sip of water. "Fetching raisins."

The Dead and the Empress nodded, while Kazuya and the Lumberjack looked clueless.

"It's a game usually played in Eastern Europe," the Empress explained on behalf of the Orphan. "That takes me back. My sisters and I used to play it during the winter, when we were snowed in and couldn't go outside. You fill a bowl with raisins and pour hot brandy in."

The Lumberjack quickly got up, shuffled to a waiter, and returned with a bowl of raisins. The Dead also rose and strode over to a waiter, returning with a bowl of brandy so hot it stung the eyes.

He poured a generous amount of brandy over the raisins.

"You pour hot brandy over raisins and set them on fire," the Empress said in a warm, reminiscing tone. "Then you take a raisin from the fire and eat it while making a wish. You get nervous about picking the raisins. It's fun. It's also very interesting to hear about other people's wishes. Even when I played it with my family, we would learn something unexpected about each other."

She smiled gently, recalling her precious family.

"Yeah," the Dead agreed, narrowing his eyes in remembrance.

When the brandy was lit, their table glowed an ominous blue in the dim dining car. Like a taffeta fabric flapping in the wind, the blue flame danced eerily from left to right, despite the absence of wind.

"I, uhh..." Kazuya was still worried about Victorique.

The Empress smiled at him. “It won’t take long. Just try it a bit. Then you can go back to the compartment.” She took a sip of wine.

Kazuya nodded reluctantly and drank some water.

The whistle rang high.

The spinning empty bottle on the table pointed to the Lumberjack.

“You first,” the Orphan said low.

The young man gave a start. “B-But I’ve never played this game before.”

“It’s fine. Just move your hand quickly and you won’t feel the heat. Just a split second.”



“Uhh... It’s kinda scary,” the Lumberjack mumbled, then daringly stuck his hand into the flames. “Hot, hot!” he cried as he took a piece of raisin and popped it in his mouth.

Everyone was staring at the Lumberjack. When he noticed their gazes, he shrank in embarrassment.

“I-I ate it,” he said.

“Now say your wish.”

“Right... I wish to find my sister, who’s been kidnapped by the king of the underworld, safe and sound.”

His voice was dark and sorrowful. Silence descended on the table. Kazuya suddenly remembered the strange voice he heard when he passed through the corridor earlier. *Brother, help me. What was that about?*

In an effort to get rid of the gloomy atmosphere, the Empress cheerfully stuck her hand into the bowl.

“Hot!” she said as she ate the raisin. “As for me... I wish my pursuers will never find me and I get to have a fun trip.” She smiled. As she stared at the Orphan’s glass, her expression clouded. “But I’m sure the more I travel, the more I’ll miss my kingdom. During winter, the sea and the sky turn white. My wonderful kingdom. My subjects must be waiting for me.”

The table fell silent again. The Dead eyed her incredulously.

Tears formed in the Empress’ eyes, and she fell quiet.

The Dead sighed. “I guess it’s my turn.”

“Yeah.”

Frowning, but with a rather bold gesture, he put his hand in the bowl and popped several raisins into his mouth.

The Dead chewed. “Let’s see... I wish gravekeepers don’t find me and that I continue to enjoy my journey with the rest of the living! How’s that? Damn, it’s hot. I think I just burned my mouth. Ow!”

The Lumberjack tapped him on the shoulder. “You ate a bunch. One would have been enough.”

“Maybe I’m getting hungry.” The Dead laughed.

Staring at the pale blue flame, Kazuya wondered what he should wish for. Currently he wished that he and Victorique would make it back to St. Marguerite Academy safely. When he made his decision, the Orphan sitting next to him finally let go of his arm. Her tight grip had left a red mark.

The Orphan put her hand in the bowl and picked up a raisin.

Her slim hand emerged from the bowl.

She put the raisin in her mouth.

And bit it.

She chewed, drank some water, and for a moment a smile appeared on her pale face. Her colorless lips parted to say something. She seemed to be laughing. Her throat twitched and her laughter turned hysterical.

She wasn't laughing. She was holding her throat, her face twisted in shock.

She was in agony.

The Orphan rose to her feet, and she toppled backward along with the cabriole-legged chair. The Empress yelped. The Lumberjack jumped up and backed away from the table. The Dead screamed to his feet.

The Orphan was holding her throat in pain. Her plaid skirt shook with her trembling legs, the hem turned up, exposing her pallid leg.

Kazuya's breath caught. On her pale thigh was a black holster, where a heavy, cold gun gleamed.

She's hiding a gun! Why would she be carrying one?

The Orphan was still squirming in pain. Her face was ashen, her eyes wide.

"What's wrong?!" The Empress held her up.

"Who... Who put poison... in my raisin?!" The Orphan staggered to her feet. She pushed the Empress hard and wobbled away.

"Orphan? What's wrong? Where are you going?"

"Someone poisoned me. You're not getting it. No one's getting the memento box. I'd rather go down with the whole train than let you have it!"

The Orphan stumbled away from the dining car. She rolled up her skirt and reached for the holster on her thigh. The Empress and the Dead followed after her. The Dead tried to pinion her arms.

"Watch out!" Kazuya yelled. She has a gun!"

"A gun?" The Dead looked back, baffled. "Why would a girl have a gun?"

The Orphan jumped out of the dining car and slammed the door shut. The Dead shrank back, standing frozen. A gunshot rang out from the other side, and the door shook violently.

The Empress screamed. The guests in the dining car rose at the sound of the gunfire, stirring.

Kazuya ran to the door. He tried to open it, but to no avail. He exchanged glances with the Dead.

“No good,” Kazuya said. “She locked the door then shot it so it can’t be opened.”

“What’s going on? Why would she do this? She looked to be in serious pain. She was breathing hard and was white as a sheet.”

The Lumberjack reached for the door and rattled it, but eventually gave up.

“She was screaming about her raisin being poisoned,” the young man said.

The train lurched. Screams filled the dining car. Shrieks were coming from the other side of the door as well.

The train swerved again. This time to the other side. The train’s whistle pealed high into the night sky, resounding endlessly.

Far off in the distance, in the driver’s cab, gunshots were fired twice.

The dining car was quiet.

The steam whistle continued roaring, thin and high, as though declaring an emergency.

Clank!

The train rocked sideways. The Empress fell to the floor, and the Lumberjack helped her up.

The Dead turned pale. “This is bad,” he muttered.

“What’s bad?”

“The train’s speeding up!”

“Victorique!” Kazuya shouted through the door. “Are you there? Are you okay?! Hey!”

The Empress started crying. The other ladies in the dining car began sobbing as well. Their male companions held their hands or embraced them to comfort them.

Kazuya pounded on the door repeatedly. “Victorique!”

“This is bad,” The Dead mumbled shakily. The Old Masquerade was gaining speed as it lurched side to side. “The first gunshot destroyed the lock on this door. The second and third shot probably destroyed the brake valve.”

The Lumberjack nodded in horror. “She said she’d rather go down with the train.”

The whistle pierced through the night.

Lamps flickered, and the clamorous room darkened.

The car shook.

“Shit,” the Dead spat. “It’s going out of control!”

The whistle sounded again and again, never stopping. The train continued running, rocking violently, wheels screeching against the tracks.

The Old Masquerade seemed to have mutated from a luxurious and elegant train into a black, night-colored mass of iron monster. It howled, eyes glowing red, as it cut through the night. Wheels creaked. Flames rose from the coals, squirming like a tongue, leaving ashes on the tracks and the forest, as though Death itself had passed by. Black breaths of smoke billowed incessantly. The train shook wildly, its ominous whistle pealing high and clear. The merciless monster known as Death was rocking the huge mass of iron, dragging its passengers through the night, and into hell.

“Victorique! Hey!”

Kazuya kept banging on the door, ramming it open with his small body, but when he realized that it would not open even with leverage, he started looking around. While the adults were panicking, Kazuya remained calm, deep in thought.

“The window,” he mumbled, nodding to himself.

“What about a window?” asked the Lumberjack. He was trembling, his face white as a sheet.

“We can’t open the door and it doesn’t seem like the people on the other side are going to either. Our only choice is to go out the window.”

“Out the window? Of this runaway train? Are you out of your mind?”

The Dead shook his head repeatedly. Kazuya opened the window of the dining car and looked out into the darkness. The Old Masquerade had left the Baltic Sea coast and was now running through a deep, dark forest. Lights from houses flickered beyond it.

Kazuya strained his eyes. None of the windows in any of the compartments appeared to be open. Taking advantage of his small frame, he slowly crawled out with his back to the window and reached for the roof. The strong wind ruffled his jet-black hair. His black-and-white waiter’s uniform flapped loudly.

The Old Masquerade, a monstrous mass of black iron, mockingly blew its whistle.

“Stop!”

Someone yanked Kazuya’s feet, sending him crashing to the floor of the dining car. He landed on his hip, and he let out a yelp. When he opened his eyes, he saw the pale face of the Lumberjack.

His elegant and pleasant expression when he was talking with others was gone, replaced instead by fear, the same fear he showed when he came tumbling out of the communications room, like he had seen a ghost.

The Lumberjack shook his head. “Don’t do it. It’s too dangerous. You’ll get yourself hurt. You can’t get out the window of a running train.”

“But I have to go,” Kazuya insisted.

“You can’t.” The Lumberjack shook his head firmly. “My parents died in a train accident a long time ago. They died in front of me and my sister while trying to stop a train that was out of control. In the end, the train stopped safely without the passengers doing anything. Every time I get on a train, memories come flashing back, and it makes me feel awful. As someone older, I have to stop you from doing something reckless.”

“Victorique’s on the other side,” Kazuya said flatly. “I have to get to her.”

“Let’s just wait for someone to take action. Leave it to the grownups.”

“What if even the grownups can’t do anything?”

Kazuya recalled the words he had said to Victorique’s half-brother, Inspector Blois, as he left St. Marguerite Academy.

“I’m going to get Victorique.”

“But I’m not doing it for you or your father. Or anyone else, for that matter. I’m her friend, and I’m worried about her.”

And before the summer vacation, when he confronted Brian Roscoe in the clock tower...

“Can you protect her with what measly power you have?”

“Keep an eye out for the transfer.”

Kazuya bit his lip.

They had had their share of fights. There were times when they got angry over the most trivial things and didn’t speak to each other, but neither Victorique nor Kazuya were the confrontational type. They only felt irritated at each other, but to quarrel with each other at this time and place...

“I’m sorry,” Kazuya said.

“Hmm? Sorry about what?”

“I’m sorry for kicking you!”

Kazuya closed his eyes and kicked the Lumberjack in the face. The young man lurched backward and crashed onto the wall on the far side of the dining car. Kazuya darted toward the window sill. He reached for the roof and clambered up.

He glanced back inside the dining car and saw the Lumberjack screaming while holding his face with both hands.

“Stop!” he cried, but Kazuya only shook his head.

Standing next to the Lumberjack was the Empress, who was laughing out loud for some reason. Kazuya gleaned a hint of madness in her eyes, and a chill ran down his spine. She was laughing merrily, with a creepy expression on her face that she had never shown before. Her high-pitched voice reached his ears over the roar of the train.

For some reason, the Dead was backing away, looking around with the sneaky look of a thief. He didn’t show this side of him either.

“I must say, it’s like a Masquerade Ball.”

His words replayed in Kazuya’s mind.

“We’re all wearing masks, like the characters in these cards.”

Who were these people who had traveled together in the compartment? Kazuya felt a sense of dread, a cold hand gripping his heart. It was as if they knew each other, yet knew nothing about them.

But now was not the time for the strange Masquerade Ball.

The Old Masquerade had turned into a black monster, running amok through the night.

Kazuya nimbly crawled up to the roof and stood there for a moment, trying to balance himself on top of the rocking train. He thought it was still nighttime, but from the top of the monstrous vehicle, he could see the pale morning sun rising from the eastern sky. It was dawn. The lonely, ominous light of daybreak. Kazuya saw the silhouettes of the dense, ancient trees, the morning sun high in the distance, the urban streets up ahead. Kazuya wondered how to describe his current feeling. His father, a strict military man, and his older brothers, both splendid men, used to say something in this situation, words he also found occasionally in their favorite magazine, Tough Guys Monthly, which was delivered to him by sea.

Right. I remember now.

Tighten up your loincloth.

Kazuya almost burst out laughing. “Tighten up your loincloth? That sounds really weird. Though they used the saying a lot.” He pursed his lips, his expression tightening. His jet-black eyes gleamed darkly, and a determined, mature look appeared on his face. His jet-black hair, reaching down to his eyes, flapped in the fierce wind.

Kazuya bolted onward.

Like a small and nimble hound.



Black billowing smoke licked at him. The wheels creaked like mechanical teeth, eating away at the tracks. Ominous ashes were strewn across the brightening forest, as if to announce where they were going. The train roared. Kazuya bit his lip at the ear-piercing sound.

The train approached a curve and shook. Kazuya stopped and quickly crouched down to avoid being blown away by the wind. His body lurched, and although he held his ground, he felt as if he were about to fall off the roof. He slipped, and almost fell, barely managing to hold on to the edge of the roof with both arms. His legs dangled in the air. A violent gust of wind threatened to lift him up. Through the window, his eyes met those of the passengers in the compartment. They were elderly ladies. One of them screamed and fainted at the sight of a young oriental waiter clinging for dear life. He gestured for them to open the window, but they all just screamed. Cursing softly, Kazuya strained his arms, kicked the window with his foot, and crawled up to the roof. The train had passed the curve and was running straight once more. Kazuya darted across the roof again, nimbly.

The wind ruffled his hair.

The whistle blew high.

Gray smoke rushed mercilessly toward Kazuya. Coughing, he advanced forward.

Dawn was breaking, casting a portentous pallor across the land, as if warning of the impending danger that the day would bring.

Dark light illuminated Kazuya's face, ashen with tension and determination. When he finally made it to the driver's cab, he stopped, his vision obscured by the gray smoke billowing out the car. The train shook violently like a monster throwing a tantrum. Calmly and agilely, Kazuya jumped off the roof and into the car.

"Whoop!"

"Eek!"

Victorique was there.

Her golden hair, gleaming softly, magnificent as a silken veil, which had never left Kazuya's mind for even a moment during the past year since he came all the way across the sea to study in the small European country of Sauville, filled his heart with awe.

To Kazuya, the color of gold only belonged to Victorique de Blois, not anyone or anything else. Ever since meeting her in the mysterious conservatory at the top of the library tower, he had thought of her whenever he saw a golden flower, a golden butterfly, or, of course, golden hair. He had been thinking of Victorique, and nothing else. A lovely, dazzling golden glow that he didn't want to leave even for a moment.

And those emerald eyes, deep and bottomless, veiled with intelligence and weariness.

“You will not die together.”

“But worry not. Your hearts will never be apart.”

Remembering the ominous prophecy given to him by the village chief of the nameless village, Kazuya bit his lips hard. It felt like he understood the true nature of the strange and sad feeling he had at that time.

What's the point if only our hearts will never be apart? I have to protect her body as well. Till death do we part. I don't care what I am to her—retainer, servant, friend, whatever. I just want to be by her side. I will never leave.

“Stay away from me, or I'll choke the life out of you, Kujou.”

Hmm?

An irritated, husky voice brought Kazuya back to his senses.

“Who just made that weird sound?”

“It was me. You dimwitted, stupid reaper!” Victorique roared. “Move! You're crushing me! Repent by singing and dancing all night long so that you can't sleep from the shame. I said move!”

Kazuya quickly got up.

On the floor of the driver's cab, Victorique lay sprawled on her back, her cheeks puffed out, glaring at him. Kazuya's blood ran cold. After running across the roof and jumping through the window into the driver's cab, he slammed onto Victorique, who was standing inside.

The opposite had happened a few times in the past. Victorique had slipped off a suitcase she was climbing and fell on top of Kazuya, or climbed a tree and was unable to climb down, only to be rescued by him by putting a ladder below her. Each time, Kazuya would catch his mysterious friend, a bundle of luxurious frills and lace, either feeling angry, worried, or jolly.

This was the first time that he had fallen on top of her.

“S-Sorry,” Kazuya said. “Are you okay?”

“...Yes,” Victorique answered in a gruff voice that seemed to echo from the depths of hell. Her eyes glinted with rage and humiliation.

“I’m really sorry. How are you feeling?”

“Awful, of course.”

“Yeah... I won’t fall on top of you anymore. I’ll make sure to choose a hard and dangerous part when landing next time. I promise.”

Kazuya got down on one knee and swore in the manner of knights. He helped his little friend up and dusted off her soiled apron dress. Then he looked around, wondering why Victorique was here.

There was a pool of blood on the floor.

A middle-aged engineer was groaning, holding his arm. It was the gunfire from earlier, Kazuya realized. One of the two shots fired in rapid succession hit the engineer in the arm.

The other shot, as accurately guessed by the Dead, had destroyed the brake valve. The conductor and several adult passengers showed up, but everyone had lost their composure, screaming, turning pale, leaning against the walls.

The Orphan was lying on the floor, wide-eyed and breathing faintly. Victorique was in the middle of taking the gun clutched in her hand. Kazuya crouched down and snatched the gun from the Orphan’s tight grasp.

“Here you go.” He handed the gun to Victorique.

The engineer looked at Kazuya. “Y-You...” he groaned. “Check... the brakes...”

“On it!”

Kazuya grabbed the broken brake valve with both hands. The lever was stuck and would not budge. The morning sun slowly illuminated the cab. The floor was slippery with glistening crimson blood. The engineer pointed ahead with a trembling finger.

“There’s a turnout just ahead.”

“A turnout?”

“It’s a switch to change tracks. If we don’t do something, this train will continue running all the way to its final stop, Saubreme, causing the biggest accident the Charles de Gillet station have ever seen. Switch from the main line to the siding. The siding slopes upward, so the train will slow down on its own. Shoot the switch operating device.”

Kazuya nodded as he wrapped his own apron around the engineer's arm to stop the bleeding. The engineer thanked him and pointed ahead again.

"I can see it. It's still far. That's it. The black-and-white square sign. Shoot that thing."

"Got it," answered a low voice.

Kazuya turned around to see Victorique, her cherry lips pursed, holding a gun in her hand. With her small body, it looked like she was holding a huge cannon.

"Y-You can't," Kazuya said, shocked.

"Oh, but I can," Victorique replied indifferently.

"Wh-What do you mean? Do you know how to use a gun?"

"No," she replied proudly. Her feet in their tiny silver boots wobbled from the weight of the gun. "But Gray Wolves can do anything."

"No, they can't! They can't do a lot of things!" Kazuya exclaimed. "Remember all the times you screwed up. You climbed a tree and couldn't climb down. You ate too much candy and couldn't move. Remember. It helps to be humble sometimes."

"Well said, Kujou. Simpletons like you need humility. Keep that in mind starting tomorrow."

"No, no, no. *You're* the one who needs it! Hey!"

Before Kazuya could stop her, Victorique pulled the trigger.

Her golden hair bounced as a gunshot rang out, and her tiny body recoiled, lifting her into the air. Kazuya quickly slid to the spot where he expected Victorique to fall, slamming his chest, knee, and forehead on the floor. He groaned in pain. Plopping onto Kazuya's buttocks, Victorique stretched like delicate, pastry cream. The bullet, of course, missed its target badly, lodging into the wall.

"Apparently, I can't," Victorique breathed, surprised.

"I told you!"

"A new discovery."

"You should have known that before you took the shot! You've never fired a gun before! And for the record, a simpleton like me knew right from the start. You hear me?"

"Only barbarians believe in empiricism, Kujou," the little Gray Wolf protested, her pride hurt. "I have never fired a gun before, but I know the theory of it well. Above all, I have my intellect—my Wellspring of Wisdom

—with... me...” Her voice was low as usual, but she sounded slightly unsure. Her pouty cheeks were a little red.

“All that doesn’t matter, you big idiot!” Kazuya snapped, rising to his feet. He was about to take the gun from Victorique, but when he saw that she was about to give it to him, he changed his mind, and let her keep it.

“Fine,” he said. “Position yourself.”

“O-Okay.” Victorique nodded, blinking in surprise.

She then planted her tiny feet firmly and brandished the gun. Her stance was worrisome, as though she did not, in fact, understand the theories well.

Kazuya put his hand on the gun too.

As soon as their hands touched, the barrel of the gun stopped shaking. Victorique’s and Kazuya’s petite frames, dressed in matching black-and-white waiter’s uniforms, snuggled gently, with the gun in the middle. It was as if they were one. Locked in an intimate embrace. A magical, special closeness that was only found in this moment.

Victorique gently leaned against Kazuya.

Kazuya felt her veil of golden hair cascading down his arms. Victorique’s tiny head was in his chest. It felt like a huge ball of light, a mass of energy that had never touched before.

Uhh...

Kazuya used his brilliant mind to make a quick mental calculation. A revolver has six bullet chambers. The Orphan first shot the lock of the dining car door. Then she ran to the driver’s cab and fired two more shots, at the engineer’s arm and the brake valve. Victorique fired a single shot just now. Four bullets had already been fired.

If the gun was fully loaded, there would be two bullets left. If it wasn’t...

Kazuya swallowed.

Victorique was trembling faintly. The barrel was completely stable.

The switching device was approaching.

“Now!” Kazuya hissed.

Victorique quickly pulled the trigger. A gunshot sounded. The shot just barely missed. The device did not so much as twitch. In Kazuya’s chest, Victorique trembled like an anxious little bird.

Only one shot left... I think... I hope so.

Kazuya did not mention to Victorique the possibility that if she missed, there would be no next time.

“Victorique,” he whispered in a soothing voice.

Victorique grunted.

“Be still. Don’t worry, I’m here. We’ll get through this together. And then we’ll return to St. Marguerite. I promise.”

“Uh...”

“One more shot, together this time. We’re not gonna miss.”

“Okay.” Victorique, shaking, gave a firm nod. “One more, Kujou.”

Matching their breathing, they snuggled close, and aimed calmly.

The last bullet, a tiny black object that would decide the fate of two people, and many more...

“Now!”



A gunshot rang out.

Kazuya held the little Victorique to his chest and planted his feet firmly so she wouldn't be blown back by the recoil. The bullet they fired together zipped into the distance.

And...

Hit the center of the switching device. It shuddered, and slowly, the track switched.

Kazuya breathed a small sigh of relief.

"See?" Victorique whispered. "I told you I could do it." She was looking up at Kazuya with the smug look of a child.

"Yeah." Kazuya nodded with a smile.

They wore similar expressions, strangely calm, the traces of the magic that just happened still on their faces.

"Yeah, you did it."

The train began to curve to the right, along the switched tracks.

From the floor came an ominous voice that seemed to echo from the depths of hell.

The Orphan was moaning.

"Don't stop the train," she said.

Victorique glanced at her.

"Please. Don't stop the train. It's better if we all die together. The Ministry of the Occult must not have Jupiter Roget's memento box. If I can't get away, I might as well blow up this train to stop... them."

The Orphan coughed up crimson blood. She was quivering, her eyes closed. Her words sounded so different from the ones Kazuya heard in the compartment and the dining car. Was her crazy talk just an act? Victorique had already figured it out earlier, though.

The train gradually began to climb. Its speed dropped, and it stopped rocking violently.

The Old Masquerade shuddered, making several low, eerie creaks as its wheels slid along the tracks, and finally came to a stop.

As soon as the train stopped moving, cries of relief resounded.

The Lumberjack came running, having crawled out of the dining car window. He stumbled into the driver's cab, and when he saw Kazuya, his face scrunched up, and he hugged him tightly.

"I-I'm sorry for kicking you earlier," Kazuya said.

“It’s okay. I’m fine. I’m so glad you’re all right.” Tears welled up in his eyes. “Thank goodness. I thought you fell off the roof. It’s how my father died. My sister and I watched him fall off the roof through the window. I’m just so happy you’re alive.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lumberjack.”

The young man shook his head. “You can stop calling me that. The masquerade is over. I’m not a lumberjack. I’m actually a student at the University of Sauville. My name is Gideon Legrant. Nice to meet you.” He shook hands with Kazuya, looking embarrassed.

“Did you say Legrant?” Victorique mumbled from the side.

Kazuya, too, thought the name sounded familiar. But he couldn’t quite remember where he heard it.

When he spotted the Orphan, the Lumberjack—Gideon Legrant—gasped.

“You’re alive!”

Victorique knelt down beside the Orphan. She didn’t mind that her apron dress was stained red with blood.

“Orphan,” she whispered. “You’re a spy for the Academy of Science, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.” Her voice was thin and faint.

“Someone from the Ministry of the Occult poisoned you. There was an enemy among the members of that masquerade ball. They learned that you found the memento box in the monastery and took it with you.”

“...”

The Orphan coughed up blood, convulsed, and became quiet. Victorique put her lips to her ear and whispered something. Even Kazuya could not hear what she said. But a look of deep relief spread across the Orphan’s face.

She smiled, and passed away.

Crouching on the other side, the Lumberjack shouted in horror. “She’s dead!” For a while, he just sat there, unable to stand up. “So she really was poisoned,” he mumbled shakily. “How horrible. What was that masquerade all about? We all ate the same raisins, but why was she the only one poisoned?”

Holding his stomach, he put his palm over the Orphan’s wide-open eyes, and gently closed them.

Even with blood on her face, her expression was as serene as the Virgin Mary, as if she was just sleeping.

“Who was she? Why did she do this?” Gideon murmured. “She’s about the same age as my sister. Damn it. I hope she’s alive...”

A screech came from outside.

It was the Empress.

When they rushed outside, the Empress was ruffling her hair like a mad woman, looking so frightened that it was hard to believe she was the same calm lady from before. She was pointing at the distance.

“What is it, Empress?”

“You can stop calling me that. My name is Britannia. The weird masquerade is over,” she said with bloodshot eyes, then pointed toward the mountains. “He’s getting away!”

“What?”

“I said he’s getting away. As soon as the train stopped, I saw him looking around suspiciously. He secretly took off just now.”

“Who?”

“The Dead!” Britannia exclaimed. “He’s escaping! Look!”

A long way down the track, a large man was running away into the distance. He glanced back once before sprinting again.

Kazuya and Gideon exchanged looks.

“The Dead?”

“He’s acting strange, all right.”

They looked back at the Orphan’s lifeless body on the floor. The next instant, they darted, and like two young hounds, began chasing the big, bearded man.

Britannia’s shrill laughter followed them from behind.

The morning sun was rising between the mountains. Birds sang, and the wind whistled softly.

Part II: After the Party

A Tale of Rabbits and Two Storms

“So far, I get it. But...”

A tall brick building in the center of Saubreme, the capital of the kingdom of Sauville.

In front of the massive Charles de Gillet station, a modern structure made of black iron and transparent glass, was a huge intersection where black cars and carriages sped past.

No one could have known that just a few hours earlier, at dawn, when the morning mist covered the gray sky of Sauville, a runaway train had threatened to destroy Charles de Gillet Station, the pride of modern architecture of the Kingdom of Sauville, the little giant of Europe. That a little girl and an oriental boy averted the crisis by firing a gun together.

The night had dawned, and the warm rays of the morning sun were illuminating the city of Saubreme. An autumn breeze blew softly. A sophisticated noblewoman with a parasol was sauntering along the pavement with a gentleman. Glamorous display windows were filled with dresses, hats, and shiny ladies' shoes, showcasing Europe's prosperity to the fullest. But on the street crouched a street urchin, face blackened with dirt, waiting for passersby to toss coins with dark, vacant eyes.

The light and darkness of the city. Modernization and ancient culture. The cars and horse-drawn carriages that slipped past each other, sounding their horns and whistles, seemed to symbolize the old and new forces locked in a battle in Saubreme, each trying to tip the scales to their side. The Academy of Science and the Ministry of the Occult.

That morning, in a historic brick building towering in the center of the glamorous city of Saubreme, in a large room on the fourth floor of the

police station, a man folded his arms and spoke.

“Everything before that, I understand. But...”

He was leaning against the wall, striking an oddly seductive pose like an impeccable beau. Silver cufflinks adorned his well-tailored suit. His leather shoes were polished to a shine, and he wore a sparkling silver choker around his neck, his silk shirt slightly exposed.

His hair, a dazzling golden color, was protruding forward like a cannon, parted in two like a crocodile’s mouth, where a deep darkness lurked. The two drills shook up and down, as if disliking the oriental boy—Kazuya Kujou—staring at them eerily.

He was carefully holding an elegant porcelain doll with blonde hair in his right arm and a wonderful oriental-style one with black hair in his left. Peering into their faces, striking poses while shaking his head up and down like a busy father caring for his twins, the man—an illustrious officer in the Saubreme Police, famed inspector Grevil de Blois—continued.

“But Kujou... Hey, stop staring at it. Nothing’s gonna come out.”

“Sorry. I couldn’t help it. It felt profound, or something.”

“It’s just hair. It’s nothing profound. Anyway, let’s get back on track.”

“Really, though. What’s up with your head? Going through some difficult times? Or you’re so happy that you added another one?”

“Why would I add another one?! Where’s your common sense?!”

Irritated, Inspector Blois turned his back away from Kazuya. But no matter how many times he turned, the boy kept following him around and staring at his hair. He glanced at his sister—Victorique—for help.

She had changed out of her apron dress into a luxurious green taffeta dress that her brother had brought with him. Adorned with glossy green ruffles and black crochet lace, the dress became narrower from the waist down like a tulip, then spread out at the hem, fringed with black laces. Her golden hair cascaded down to the floor. Her appearance overshadowed the porcelain doll in Inspector Blois’s hands, which were expensive enough to buy a large mansion.

She was smoking a white, ceramic pipe grumpily. A thin wisp of smoke slowly rose to the ceiling.

Sensing a gaze, she glanced at her brother with sharp and cold eyes.

“Quite an amusing hair you’ve got there, brother,” she said.

“All thanks to you, sister.”

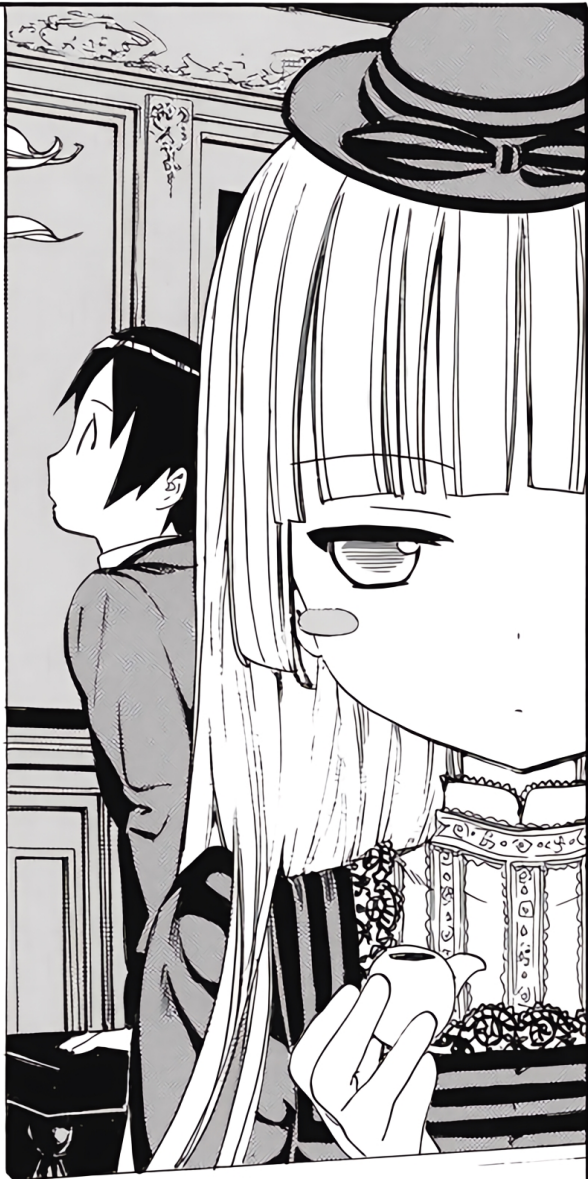
The siblings' fine eyebrows twitched. Victorique turned away first, snorting. Inspector Blois, influenced by his sister, gently placed one of the dolls on the table, picked up his own pipe and lit it. Thin wisps of white smoke drifted toward the ceiling from the pursed lips of both Victorique and Inspector Blois.

Around them were young detectives, fresh out of school, watching with bated breath. Young and capable, they had been urgently convened to investigate the Old Masquerade Incident that had occurred earlier in the day, but at the moment, they were entranced by Victorique de Blois, the sister of the famous police inspector Grevil de Blois, a tiny golden girl with the mystic presence of some ancient creature.

“Apparently, they’re siblings,” one whispered.

“No way...”

“Look...”



The siblings had their backs to each other, blowing their pipes in a very similar gesture. And for some reason, the brother was holding a doll clothed in an extravagant dress.

The detectives exchanged glances, puzzled.

“I kinda see it...”

“And I kinda don’t...”

“Right...?”

“Yeah...”

“What is it exactly...?”

“But Kujou,” Inspector Blois said, raising his voice.

“Like I’ve been saying,” Kazuya answered, finally turning his gaze away from the inspector’s head. “Last night, we escaped from the water pouring in through the sluice gate that Simon Hunt had opened and got on the transcontinental train, the Old Masquerade, just in the nick of time.”

“I get all that. But... Why did a murder take place on the train? How was the woman killed? Who’s the culprit?”

“...”

“Start from the beginning, Kujou.”

“I can explain what happened.”

“Start talking, then. The department has tasked me with handling the Old Masquerade case.”

Stealing glances at the two drills on top of the Inspector’s head, Kazuya straightened up and took on a serious tone. “But we’ll have to start from when we boarded the train and introduced ourselves. The victim had a small, mysterious red box with her.”

After listening to Kazuya’s account, Inspector Blois went silent, occasionally striking poses.

He’s absolutely clueless, Kazuya thought. The Sauville police detectives, however, watched him with great trust. After all, Inspector Blois was a well-known and admired police inspector who brilliantly solved the Ghost Ship Queen Berry case, which was thought to have gone cold, and Jeantan’s Dark Auction case. His achievements had been featured many times in newspapers.

Seeing the detectives and their expectant looks, the inspector changed poses, troubled.

“Ahuh.”

He blew his pipe and glanced up at the ceiling with a distant look. The anxiety brought tears in his eyes.

“So, the victim insisted that there was an enemy among the people in the compartment. And in the middle of a game of Pick a Raisin, that someone poisoned her. On the verge of death, she ran to the driver’s cab, shot the engineer, and destroyed the brake valve. Fortunately, the engineer survived, but a lot of mysteries remain unsolved.”

“Yeah.” Kazuya inclined his head. “No one could have known who would pick up which raisin from the bowl. In short, I think it was just a coincidence. Besides, the others were munching on the raisins before her, and they were all fine.”

“Hmm, I see.” The inspector glanced at his sister.

Kazuya turned around as well.

Sitting in one of the best fluffy red chairs in the police station, which had been prepared by the young detectives for the lovely intruder, Victorique was blowing her pipe languidly. Noticing their gazes, she looked at Kazuya and Inspector Blois, then turned her face away again.

“Ah,” she gasped, and began studying her brother. Inspector Blois raised one of his legs in expectation.

Victorique’s green eyes were glassy as she pondered something. Silence reigned in the room. A moment later, she nodded to herself.

Inspector Blois stared at her. “What is it?”

Victorique pointed a chubby finger at the inspector. “I got it. An albatross.”

“What?” Kazuya blurted. “Ah, I see. His weird hairdo *does* look like a bird’s beak, huh? I thought it would start squawking any moment. For once, we agree on something... Hey, Inspector. Your face is all red. Are you... angry?”

Inspector Blois was shaking. “You told me to add another one,” he snapped. “As a man, I followed your order without question. What’s with this treatment? Because of you...”

“Inspector?”

“It’s nothing. I’m fine. Let’s continue the investigation,” he said calmly, tears in his eyes. “Our findings revealed that none of the raisins in the bowl were poisoned. It would mean that only the raisin she picked was laced with

poison. As you said, there was indeed a red box among the victim's belongings. But it was empty."

"Empty?"

"Yeah." Inspector Blois made a gesture, and one of the detectives nodded and left the room. Shortly after, he returned with a red box in a plastic bag.

Kazuya nodded. "I believe that's the one. But you say it was empty?"

"It was."

"Then she was killed over an empty box?" Kazuya glanced over at Victorique, who was quietly puffing on her pipe. He couldn't tell what was on her mind.

"About the communications room, where you said you heard a strange voice that sounded like it came from the underworld. It was indeed full of communications equipment, and there were signs that it was being used to contact someone. We're still examining the train. We've brought the three people who were with you to the station to take their statements. It seems one of them tried to escape, but I'm glad you caught them. We're just about to get their statements."

"We already gave our statements, but I guess we can't leave yet?"

Kazuya asked.

Inspector Blois looked appalled. "Of course not! My sister aside, you, Kujou, are one of the prime suspects. You were present when the victim put the poisoned raisin in her mouth."

"What?!" Kazuya exclaimed.

I see... Personally, I don't really mind, but I want to escort Victorique back to the academy safely. Now what?

In contrast to Kazuya's gloomy mood, Inspector Blois was all smiles.

The inspector snapped his fingers and pointed at the boy's face. "You look upset."

"Of course! Hey, Victorique."

Victorique glanced up, blinking in surprise. "Kujou, can I go home before you?" she asked with a serious face.

"What?! You're leaving me here alone?!"

"It's boring here, and I'm hungry."

"Why, you..." Kazuya's face turned grim. "May I remind you that I traveled all the way to that dreadful monastery to get you? Now you just

want to leave me behind? Where's your humanity?"

"Shut it, Kujou." Victorique wrinkled her shapely nose and exhaled sharply. "I was only joking."

"What's more... Oh, you were joking? Sorry for getting mad, then. Also, what was that, are you hungry?"

Kazuya searched his breast pocket, his pants, scratched his head, and even took off his shoes before finally admitting that he didn't have a single piece of candy with him.

"Can you get her something sweet?" he asked a nearby detective.

"This is a police station, not a café."

"Something sweet."

Pressured by the boy's hard tone, the detective shrank back and left the room. He brought a pile of his own chocolate bonbons and quietly handed them to Kazuya.

After thanking the man, Kazuya turned to Victorique. "Here you go."

"Your effort is appreciated."

"Smug as always, I see."

Victorique started eating, smearing chocolate all over her mouth.

"So who killed the Orphan with the poisoned raisin? And how?"

Inspector Blois murmured grimly. "Who was the culprit, the Jack who infiltrated the masquerade ball? And what was their motive? Is Kujou the culprit? If he is, he will, of course, face jail time. No windows, no bathroom, and on top of that, rats will feast on your neck."

"Please don't scare me like that."

"Where does the truth lie?" The inspector suddenly dropped his voice low so that the detectives could not hear him. "It's your time to shine, Victorique."

"I knew you were gonna count on her to solve the case for you!" Kazuya snapped. "Can't you at least use your own head a little?!"

Flustered, the inspector looked around. "Ssh!"

Wearing a stern look, he leaned his upper body forward to intimidate Kazuya, pointing his sharp drills at him. But it was what's on his head that drew the boy's attention, not his face. Kazuya's jet-black eyes blinked repeatedly, fascinated by the profound darkness between the drills.

The more he peered into them, the more he felt terrified.

A bottomless, dark abyss.

“V-Victorique...”

“If you’re scared, just look away,” Victorique huffed.

“R-Right. It’s just so... captivating.”

“I take it you don’t like the albatross Grevil?” Victorique asked.

Something seemed to be in her mind.

Kazuya nodded firmly. “No. How do I put it... It’s extremely sinister. Especially the dark part.”

“I see.” Nodding nonchalantly, Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth. “Grevil.”

“What is it, my sister?”

“Get rid of that weird hairdo. Kujou doesn’t like it for some reason, and I’m sick of looking at it too.”

“You little...!”

Inspector Blois gritted his teeth. He tossed the doll in his arms and darted toward his sister, but Kazuya quickly subdued him by locking his arms.

Dumbfounded detectives watched the strange and ghastly sibling squabble.

“Sick of looking at it?! It hasn’t even been thirty minutes since you saw it! I’ve had my hair like this for days. It’s a pain in the butt to set. It takes me two whole hours in the morning just to fix it. Harden, dry, harden, dry, harden, dry... over and over!” There were tears in his eyes.

“That’s not important right now,” Kazuya said offhandedly.

“What? Did I hear that right? Did you say it’s not important?!”

“Okay, maybe it is. But only to you. Anyway, the murder on the Old Masquerade comes first. Take their statements.”

“You’re right...”

Inspector Blois stopped his rampage. He let out an embarrassed sigh, and wiped his sweaty forehead with a lace handkerchief he pulled out of his breast pocket. He put on a bashful smile.

“I got a little worked up,” he said.

“It’s okay. Let’s talk about your stupid hairdo later. For now—Whoa!”

The inspector pointed the drills at Kazuya again, causing him to jump. Inspector Blois’s eyes were misty and sharp. He gestured at the detectives, and they got up uneasily.

One of them turned around. “Who should we call first?” he asked.

Inspector Blois looked at Victorique. "I'll let my sister decide," he said, a little flustered. "She's still a child, but um, she has so much respect for her brother that she's showing some interest in criminal investigation. Ahem."

Kazuya looked up at Inspector Blois in disappointment. The detectives nodded, a little surprised, and stared at the lovely, doll-like intruder. Inspector was extremely restless.

Victorique yawned. "Anyone will do. It doesn't really matter which card we flip first." She glanced at Kazuya. "Kujou, who's the one you're most friendly with?"

"Um.. That would be Gideon the Lumberjack, I guess. He's the closest in terms of age, too."

"Very well. We can start with Gideon."

The detective nodded and shuffled out the room.

An awkward, stifling silence fell over the room. Brother and sister, one with magnificent golden hair hanging to the floor and the other set in a weird shape, had their backs turned to each other, smoking their pipes in silence. Two wisps of white smoke rose toward the ceiling.

After a while, the door opened. A young man of about twenty, with the appearance of a member of the nobility, entered, accompanied by a detective. The same young man who attended the strange masquerade ball as a Lumberjack. He looked completely exhausted, but when he saw Victorique and Kazuya, he smiled in relief. Kazuya nodded at him.

The young man sat at a table in the center of the room. Placing his hand on the Bible presented by the detective, he mumbled, "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." He hung his head down, a little embarrassed, and nodded to himself.

"Now, then," Inspector Blois began. "First, tell us your name. And then, I'd like you to tell us what happened last night and early this morning in as much detail as possible."

"Okay." The young man nodded grimly. He looked at Kazuya, then at Victorique. He smiled a little, relieved that his fellow travelers were present. Then he opened his mouth and said his name. "My name is Gideon Legrant. I'm a student of architecture at the University of Sauville. That's right. It goes without saying that I am not, in fact, a lumberjack."

The Lumberjack's Statement

My name is Gideon Legrant. I'm a student of architecture at the University of Sauville. That's right. It goes without saying that I am not, in fact, a lumberjack. But everyone was lying about their identities, calling themselves the Orphan, or the Empress, so I followed their lead and gave a false occupation. They laughed at me, though.

I live in a boarding house in Saubreme. Yes. What I told that oriental boy right there, Kujou, was true. I lost my parents in a train accident when I was a child, and since then, my adoptive father has been funding my studies. I've been trying to repay him for my tuition fees in various ways. I can't just mooch off of him, you know.

The reason I took the train was, well, like everyone else, I went to watch the show at the monastery. I got a ticket through some connections. Was the show interesting? To be honest, I don't know. The ladies seemed to really enjoy it, though.

...Hmm?

I'm acting restless? No, I'm not.

I am?

I mean, I can't relax. I've never given a statement at a police station before. Besides, I saw a person die right in front of me. It'd be weird if I was calm, no?

Yeah, I'm fine. I'm fine. I've calmed down. Moving on.

It was a coincidence that I ended up in that compartment. The train was awfully crowded, and there were people everywhere. I ran into a man wandering around, looking for a seat, a large guy who called himself the Dead. We were walking down the corridor, having a chat, when he looked into that compartment and said it was empty. So I went in, only to find that there were four other people there. It just so happened that the seat he spotted was empty, so he assumed there was no one inside. The woman who called herself the Empress let us in, and so we settled in that compartment.

The Empress is nice. I kinda wish I had a mother like her. Childish, I know. It's embarrassing. I shouldn't have said that.

...What?

I'm looking restless again?

No, I'm not.

Am I?

I must be doing it subconsciously, then. I just can't sit still. I mean, I'm in a room in a police station, surrounded by detectives. My legs have been shaking for a while now. I'm too faint-hearted, I guess.

I keep glancing at the door?

Am I waiting for someone to arrive?

What did you say? Um, I believe you introduced yourself as a Gray Wolf? Did you catch a cold? Your vassal was worried when you got your dress all wet. I was jealous of how close you two were. You remind me of my sister. What? She's bigger than you. It reminded me of when we were kids. She was frail, too, and caught colds easily.

Oh, sorry. Back to what happened. This girl keeps on pointing out how I keep on looking around. I'm not moving my neck, then. I don't think I'm behaving suspiciously.

Does it bother you, Inspector?

I see. Good. If it doesn't bother you, then I suppose it's fine.

That's a nice hairdo. No, I'm not sweet-talking you. Individuality is important.

Uh, so, where were we?

Ah, yes. We were in the compartment with four other passengers.

One was a kind woman who called herself an Empress. She was very concerned about the girl next to her. And I mean *very*. The girl had dark hair and blue eyes, and was overall pale. She kept mumbling to herself. It was kinda creepy. She dropped a box? Ah, right. I think she did. A red box? Y-Yes, that's right. It was about the size of my palm. What kind of box was it? It was square, so it couldn't have been a pencil box. It was too plain for candies too. Anyway, it had a strange design, now that I think about it.

And then there was this pretty girl right here and her oriental friend. We introduced ourselves to each other and started talking. First, the dark-haired girl, I don't know if she was neurotic or hysterical, but she opened with a rather spooky statement. She said she was an Orphan and she was looking

for her birthday, which put the big guy in a bad mood. So the lady played along for her and introduced herself as an Empress. I really like the lady. I thought she was like my mother. Oops, there I go again. I shouldn't have said that. How embarrassing. Anyway, I went along with them as well and said something about the king of the underworld and that I was a lumberjack and that I was traveling around chopping wood. The big guy burst out laughing, and he started telling us his own story, using a tale from the monastery called The Masque of the Black Death. He told us that he was a dead man who had possessed the body of a man who had just died. I found his story most amusing. I couldn't help but laugh.

And then he and these two kids here went out to change. I had a little chat with the Empress. But she had to calm down the crying Oprhan, so I decided to leave for a bit.

As soon as I started walking down the corridor, I felt sick. What? Yes, that's right. You remember? How embarrassing. Yes. These two here saw me shaking because I wasn't feeling well. How did I get sick? I remembered my parents' train accident. When I was a child, I saw my parents fall off a runaway train and die. With my own eyes. You know how you can keep your mind off things when you're with others, but when you're alone, the thoughts come rushing like darkness. That's it. I felt dizzy in the corridor and entered the nearest room. The communications room? Was it? Ah, right. I guess. It was a tiny room with communications equipment. But I'm not really familiar with them. Hmm? You heard a voice when you passed by? What did it say?

Brother, help me?

...

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Quit joking. I didn't hear anything. The equipment wasn't working, and I didn't touch anything. My head was pounding, and I felt so distressed, sad, and heartbroken that I felt like a different person. I felt suffocated in the small room, and as soon as I stumbled out, I ran into you guys. Yes, these two kids right here. They had just changed into the servers' uniform and were on their way back.

And then... Let's see...

I was so sick, my memory's a little fuzzy. I think I returned to the compartment, but then I went to the dining car with the Dead. I was feeling uneasy because the Orphan was crying and yelling about enemies or something. She said she was going to get killed, and I thought, I gotta stay away from her. Then she actually ended up getting killed. Maybe she was telling the truth about the whole enemy thing? If so, I should have listened to her instead of finding her annoying. It's too late for regrets, though.

While we were in the dining car, this oriental boy, the Vassal, the Empress, and the Orphan arrived. The Vassal was concerned about the Gray Wolf left in the compartment and wanted to leave, but he was forced to stay. The Dead and I had been drinking wine, so I prepared glasses for the other three. The waiters were too busy, and I didn't want to cause too much trouble by calling one. The Empress drank wine too, while the other two had water, and while we were talking, the Orphan suggested a game called Pick a Raisin.

Who brought the bowl of raisins?

...

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It was me.

You must think I'm suspicious. Ah, my knees are shaking. But you're wrong. Besides, how would I know which raisin she would pick? What? Who brought the brandy? The Dead. But if the brandy had been poisoned, we would have all died.

Whose turn it was to pick a raisin was decided by spinning an empty bottle. I think it was the Empress who spun it. The bottle pointed to me, so I had to eat first. It was just pure coincidence.

What? She could've controlled the bottle?

I don't know.

But I don't think she did.

The Empress is not that kind of person.

Well, yes, of course. I've never met her before, but I'm sure she's a nice person.

Anyway, I ate the raisin and made a wish. Next was the Empress. She was very eager to tell us about how she had escaped from her country despite being an empress. Her identity was supposed to be made-up. She said that if she continued her journey, she would eventually miss her

kingdom. She also mentioned that during the winter the sea turns white and the sky is filled with seawater. And that her subjects are waiting for her.

I have a good memory?

Well, yeah.

I was curious about what she said. What did she mean by the sky filled with seawater? I get that it's a seaside country, but the sky can't possibly be filled with seawater. It's the sky, not the sea.

No, that's all.

Next it was the Dead who picked up a raisin. Did he make some strange gesture? No, I don't think so.

I didn't really notice anything in particular. I wasn't paying close attention. I remember him sticking his hand into the flame, taking a handful of raisins, and then burning his mouth. The Empress said he only had to get one.

And then it was the Orphan's turn.

Nothing seemed off. She didn't do any weird gestures. She put her hand in the bowl, picked up a random raisin, and put it in her mouth. And then she started groaning in pain.

It was chaos after that.

She said her raisin was poisoned and then ran out of the dining car. The Vassal said she had a gun, much to my horror, and then we heard a gunshot from behind the closed door. With the lock broken, the door couldn't be opened. Then we heard a couple of gunshots coming from the driver's cab, and the train started going out of control. It was a nightmare. Memories of the accident when I was a kid had me shaking. Then the Vassal suddenly climbed out of the window onto the roof to get to the driver's cab. The situation was similar to when my parents died, so I tried my best to stop him. But he ended up kicking me off and going up to the roof.

I don't really know what happened after that.

I was just panicking. I can't remember.

I think someone, a woman, was laughing. Who was it? I don't know, maybe the Empress? But how in the world could she laugh in that situation? The Dead was petrified. I think he was mumbling something. This is bad, is what he said, I believe.

"This is bad. An incident like this will draw people."

Something like that.

What did he mean by that?

I have absolutely no clue.

I didn't ask. I was too scared. I thought I would just black out.

I called my sister's name. I thought, "I don't want to die in a train accident, too."

I didn't want to leave her alone. I can't leave my frail sister alone in this fickle world.

A gunshot sounded in the distance. I closed my eyes and prayed.

One shot.

Two shots.

And then... another shot.

I prayed. I was praying while crying. I think the woman was still laughing then. I don't know who it was, though.

Eventually, the train stopped.

It seemed unreal.

I couldn't really believe it at first. I thought the train had already crashed and was on fire. I thought I was dead, dreaming about being safe. I thought I was already in the underworld. I shivered like a little girl at the terrifying thought.

I climbed out of the same window that the Vassal used.

And then to my surprise, it was morning.

The pale morning sun was rising from the eastern sky, shining on my face. The train had stopped halfway up a hill. I could see the tracks below. We're safe, I thought. Then I doubted it again. I ran. When I made it into the driver's cab, I saw the Gray Wolf and her vassal. The Vassal was holding a gun.

I thought he looked way braver than me. He was younger, and he was from the Orient. I was a little ashamed of myself for thinking that he belonged to an inferior race. I felt a sense of friendship and camaraderie with a boy I had just met by chance and would probably never see again. As for the Gray Wolf, she was sitting on the floor. I saw the Orphan lying there. My sister was about the same age as her and had the same dark hair. It was as if my sister died for the train to stop. It was just a momentary impression, though. In that moment, the Gray Wolf whispered something to the dying, convulsing Orphan.

What did you say to her?

Keeping it to yourself, I see.

I heard a bit of what you said. I think you whispered the word “fake”.
Something something is fake. Did I hear it wrong?

Still not talking. Oh, well.

After that, I reached for the Orphan and closed her eyes. I was surprised to see the serene look on her face. I expected it to be contorted with regret.

Outside the train, the Empress screamed. When we got out, we saw the Dead running and trying to escape. The Vassal was shocked, but not me, considering what he mumbled earlier. “This is bad. An incident like this will draw people.”

I realized then that the Dead was hiding something.

So I ran along the tracks with Kujou to catch the fleeing man.

What?

I was restless the whole time I was talking?

I was glancing at the door repeatedly as if waiting for someone to arrive?

...

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.....

Of course not.

You’re mistaken, Miss Gray Wolf.



“Of course not.”

Gideon’s soft, composed voice echoed in the room. Surrounded by detectives taking notes, he had looked pale and nervous earlier, but as he spoke he gradually regained his composure. His eyes were now calm, and he even had a smile on his lips.

“You’re mistaken, Miss Gray Wolf,” Gideon muttered, and gently pulled his eyes away from the girl with the magnificent golden hair and green taffeta dress. She was smoking her pipe as she stared at him.

Slowly, he shifted his head to look at the door.

He was watching the door with narrow eyes, as though waiting for someone to arrive. A subconscious motion, most likely.

Victorique coughed and said, “You’re looking at the door again,” to which Gideon replied curiously, “What?”

“You must be secretly waiting for someone.”

“Another silly remark, Miss Gray Wolf. Inspector, I have no idea what she’s talking about. Hmm? Looks like your hairstyle changed a bit.”

“Hmm?”

Inspector Grevil de Blois, who, like his sister, was smoking his pipe, wearing a distant look in his eyes, snapped back to his senses.

“Yes?”

“Were you listening, Inspector? I just finished giving my statement.”

“Of course I was listening. What was that about my hair?”

Noticing that Kazuya, standing beside him, was peering at him in horror, the Inspector gently put his hand to his head.

The lower half of the double-drill was slowly drooping down, losing to gravity. A deep darkness slowly began to open, as if a giant bird had opened its beak. Even now, an ominous squawking could almost be heard.

“Oh, no. It’s hot today. It seems to be melting,” the inspector muttered, poking the drill repeatedly with the pipe’s mouthpiece.

The pipe’s flame hit the end of the drill, burning his golden tips. Kazuya watched in horror as smoke started rising. Inspector Blois quickly bolted, bent at the waist exactly ninety degrees like a bowing albatross, and dunked his hair into a detective’s cup of coffee.

Fwwooosshh!

A smoky smell wafted from the coffee.

Once the fire was extinguished, Inspector Blois lifted his head from the cup and wiped the coffee-soaked drill with a silk handkerchief.

"I was listening to your statement, of course," he said gravely, wiping his hair. "I now have a firm grasp of the situation."

"I-I see... Are you all right?"

"This is nothing."

"Oh. Um, I'm glad to be of assistance." Gideon looked anxious. "I just feel really bad for the victim. Please find the culprit, Inspector. They can't get away with it. They mustn't." His face clouded. He stood up, looking crestfallen. "Are we done? I can't go home yet, can I?"

"No. You're a prime suspect. You will stay here until the case is solved."

"Okay. I'd be more than happy to help."

Inspector Blois glanced at Victorique with a hint of worry on his face, a face that was asking if there was anything else she wanted to ask.

Victorique did not so much as spare her brother a glance.

Inspector Blois stared at his sister intently.

Eventually, Victorique removed the pipe from her cherry lips. "My brother forgot something."

"I just burned my hair," the Inspector said. "What is it? I'm not exactly in the right state of mind, so if I have forgotten something, do point it out. Please."

He uttered the last word in an incredibly low voice, so that the detectives wouldn't hear. Victorique was puffing on her pipe coolly, but when she noticed that Kazuya was also staring at her, she reluctantly said, "Luggage inspection."

Inspector Blois, unable to see up front, nodded as he lifted the drooping drill up with both hands. Before the inspector could give the order, Gideon presented his bag. It was a small, brown suitcase made of fine leather, just big enough for an overnight trip. The pretty, rounded design at the corners made it seem like a woman's suitcase.

"It's a little embarrassing, but if it helps with your investigation," Gideon said.

"Why would you be embarrassed?" Victorique asked.

"There are toys inside. I have a bit of a childish side, and my sister pokes fun at me for it. She would ask why I cared so much about these things. I bet you'd laugh too. Like that one, Inspector."

Gideon pointed to the small, yellow perfume bottle that the Inspector had taken out from the suitcase. His cheeks turned red with embarrassment.

“What’s this?” the inspector asked.

“It’s, um, my mother’s. I have a lot more of her stuff, but that one is the smallest and the prettiest, so I always carry it with me.”

“Hmm. What’s this?” Inspector Blois picked up something that looked like a dead earthworm.

Gideon gasped. “Sorry. I picked that up in the woods last week. Picking up dead insects and putting them in my bag is a habit I’ve had since I was a kid, and I still haven’t gotten over it. I mainly use them to scare my sister.”

“What a mean brother,” Victorique interjected.

Inspector Blois shot his sister a hateful glare. “I know a horrid sister who scares her brother to death,” he mumbled softly so the detective wouldn’t hear. “Using her Wellspring of Wisdom, she’s able to guess everything correctly like a demon, shortening the life span of her dear brother by a hundred years.”

Victorique blew on her pipe nonchalantly. “If I shortened your life by a hundred years, you’d be dead by now, Grevil. Not that I would mind that.”

A dark and heavy atmosphere filled the room. Gideon’s gaze darted around uneasily.

Inspector Blois put his hand in the suitcase again. A small collection of items came out. “What is this?” he mumbled, putting them all on the table. Gideon looked terribly ashamed.

There was a scrap of paper with the words “Don’t look back” scribbled on it.

“Oh, that’s uhh... There was this cute girl in college who turned me down quite hard recently. So I, uhh... wrote that to remind myself.”

A tiny portrait showing a boy standing in a forest.

“It’s a sketch from my childhood,” Gideon said proudly.

“Why a portrait and not a photograph?”

“We have more portraits than photos.”

“I see. Must be the ‘taste of the past’ thing that’s trending lately.” Inspector Blois nodded.

With the advancement of science, more and more people had been taking commemorative photographs, buying photos of actresses, while among the aristocracy there was a trend of hiring expensive painters to

draw medieval-style portraits of them. While others were excited about new technology, some valued old customs, both sides coexisting.

Inspector Blois laid out the contents of the suitcase on the table—from textbooks to clothes, with some strange trinkets mixed in.

“How do I put it,” the inspector muttered with exasperation. “This looks like a certain kind of lady’s handbag. Random knick-knacks that god knows what they’re used for, a portrait of a boy, but nothing I would consider a necessity. You’re like a ditzy lady who forgets her handkerchief, her wallet, and the house keys so she gets locked out.”

“That’s why I said it was embarrassing. I agree with you, but it’s hard to get rid of habit.”

Gideon turned bright red and started tossing the items back into the suitcase. Narrowing her eyes, Victorique watched him with great interest.

“Are we done?” the young man asked.

Inspector Blois turned to his sister for affirmation. Victorique gave a faint nod, pulling her well-shaped chin back.

“Yes,” the Inspector declared confidently. “You may wait in the waiting room.”

“Okay.”

Gideon bowed gracefully, suitcase in hand, and left the room. Kazuya stared at his face. Gideon had smiled when he thanked Inspector Blois, but as soon as he turned his back, his innocent smile faded.

His face was dark and drawn. He looked like he was hiding something. Curious, Kazuya followed Gideon with his gaze. When the door closed, he turned to Victorique.

Victorique also watched Gideon’s back with sharp eyes. She kept staring at the closed door for a while, smoking her pipe.

“Now, then.” Inspector Blois struck a pose, raising one leg, and snapped his fingers. “Next witness. Who will it be? Let’s hear what my lovely sister has to say. Not that we need to, of course. It’s just my way of, uhh, spending time with family! My dear sister, are you listening?”

Victorique yawned.

“You need to be more serious,” Inspector Blois hissed.

“It doesn’t matter which card you choose,” Victorique replied. “The order doesn’t matter. But... I am curious about a ‘sky filled with seawater’. Call the Empress next, Grevil.”

“So the lady’s next.” Inspector Blois nodded and gave the order to the detectives. “Go get the middle-aged lady.”

A short while later, the door opened, and a calm-looking middle-aged woman, whom they had met in the compartment of the Old Masquerade, entered. She was the one who, along with the murdered dark-haired girl, had helped Victorique and Kazuya up onto the train.

She staggered a few steps, so one of the detectives lent her a hand and guided her to the chair. Whether or not she could see Inspector Blois, who was clearly sporting a weird hairdo, was a mystery; she did not react in any way, neither surprised nor appalled. Her mind seemed to be somewhere else. She sat on the chair, dazed, as though immersed in her own world. She seemed exhausted, like a hunched, elderly woman just waiting for her time to come.

Kazuya leaned forward, astonished. She looked like a different person, not the lively and attentive Empress he had met on the train. He recalled seeing her laughing with a dangerous glint in her eyes when the train started speeding out of control. At that time, the Empress was indeed acting strangely, giving her a threatening impression. But the despondent aura she gave off now was another side that he had not seen before.

What’s wrong with her?

As he gazed at her with concern, the Empress suddenly looked around as if just now noticing that there were people present. She then straightened herself and looked at each of them with an air of both superiority and dignity.

Her eyes were bulging, her pupils dilated; it seemed as though the reddish-black capillaries would burst at any moment. She had the unmistakable look of a madwoman. Kazuya shuddered.

Was she always a lunatic? I didn’t notice at all while we were together.

A lunatic, or...

If it was an act, it was one worthy of an award. She had the face of a very skilled actress. Which was it? The room was filled with an odd tension. No one spoke; everyone just stared at the bizarre middle-aged woman, watching her closely as to not miss a single move.

With all eyes fixed on her, the Empress, pale-faced and eyes bulging, gracefully laid her palm on the Bible a detective held out to her. “I swear to

tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” she mumbled.

Inspector Blois cleared his throat. The strange atmosphere had put him on edge. The drooping drill on his head was quivering.

An odd silence reigned in the room, and no one said a word.

“Well, then.” Inspector Blois broke the silence. His voice was trembling. “We’ll start from your name. Then tell us what happened on the Old Masquerade in detail.”

“That won’t be a problem,” the lady replied magnanimously.

She looked around the room and gave a grateful nod to everyone present. Despite wearing only a plain blouse and skirt, with no make-up, she carried herself like she was a different person.

Opening her pale lips, a passenger of the Old Masquerade, a middle-aged woman they had met at the bizarre masquerade ball, spoke.

“My name is Britannia Gabriel Coco de Krehadl,” she began in a proud, high-pitched voice. “I am the Empress of the Kingdom of Krehadl, located northwest of Lithuania. But you all already know that, of course.”

Empress Britannia's Statement

My name is Britannia Gabrielle Coco de Krehadl. I am the Empress of the Kingdom of Krehadl, located in the northwest of Lithuania. But of course you already know that. I knew as I entered this room. The way I was very politely escorted to this table suggested that you were already aware of my identity. I was treated like royalty, so I knew. Yes, I am the famous Empress who disappeared from the Kingdom of Krehadl.

I secretly left the kingdom to have fun traveling alone, but that ends today. I'm sure you've already contacted the ambassador. Oh, don't look at me like that. It's your job. I'm not angry.

What?

I beg your pardon.

Can you say that one more time?

The Kingdom of Krehadl, northwest of Lithuania, is not on the world map? And that there is no land to the northwest of Lithuania, only the sea?

Ahaha!

Ah, good one.

Of course I know that, Mr. Funny Inspector. Oh, don't give me that look. My kingdom is not on land.

Where is it, you ask?

Ugh. Don't you get it?

The sea.

At the bottom of the deep Baltic Sea.

Of course, long ago, the ancient kingdom of Krehadl was above ground. Trees bearing ripe fruits were everywhere in the black forest. And on the white shores, there was plenty of fine amber, and the crops were plentiful. It was a truly rich and peaceful kingdom. One day however, I, the Empress, became a sea witch's rival in love, incurring her wrath, and the kingdom sank to the bottom of the sea in one night. Hundreds, perhaps a thousand years have passed since then. I've lost track of the time. Anyway, the kingdom of Krehadl is still at the bottom of the sea, with its temple rocked

by the tide, the citizens living the same way they did in ancient times. On a fine day, when the waves are calm, you can see the sunken ancient gray temples from the sandy shores of Lithuania. On such days, we also get a great view of the landscape above from the bottom of the sea. The tide ebbs and flows in the sky, the gray waves drifting like clouds.

During those times, I would get out of the water, sit on the rocks, and sing. However, sailors on land do not like to hear us singing, claiming that their ship will capsize or that a storm is coming. We are also known as sirens, the nymphs of the sea, feared by sailors. We have never done anything to scare the people on land.

Yes, Krehadl is a very nice kingdom. I love my kingdom and its people. But sometimes I get bored and sneak off to travel. We all need inspiration, don't we?

What?

Why would I lie?

How rude! I am not lying!

Am I pretending to be insane? What are you talking about? Why would I do that?

The insolence! I will tell the ambassador of Krehadl about your attitude later. Keep that in mind.

A statement?

Very well. If it helps with your investigation.

No, I am not angry anymore. I am a benevolent person.

To be perfectly honest, I don't really know what happened aboard the Old Masquerade. I am not certain if I can be of any help. The people in the compartment were not even acquaintances, so I have no idea why that happened. I would love to know what happened myself.

But in any case, I will share what I witnessed.

Ah, yes. The Orphan said something that only I heard. By Orphan, I mean the poor girl who was murdered. We didn't know each other's real names, so we simply gave each other some strange nicknames instead.

I met the Orphan on the train on the way to the monastery, along with the Vassal over there. We didn't talk much then, but upon boarding on the return train, we crossed paths again. There was an aura of familiarity between us. She also sensed my dignity, a kind of elegance that I could not hide, and showed me respect. That's why I found her charming.

Oh, that?

The story she told us.

About her searching for her birthday.

That was all lies.

How do I know?

Because she told me. She said that it was a lie. She was pretending to be crazy to protect herself. She didn't hide the truth from me.

When did she tell me? I think I was in the compartment with the Gray Wolf and her Vassal when the Dead and the Lumberjack came in. After we introduced ourselves, the Gray Wolf sneezed, so the Vassal and the Dead went out to change her wet dress. Then the Orphan seemed like she wanted to confide in me, so the Lumberjack—that very nice young nobleman—left the compartment to give us some space.

Finally, the Orphan and I were alone.

She had been screaming and crying hysterically, but suddenly her behavior changed.

She was no longer crying or screaming.

She just seemed terrified.

"I think someone is after me," she had said.

Her voice was shaking violently. I asked her what she meant.

"Before we introduced ourselves, I accidentally dropped a very important package on the floor. No one was supposed to see it. I made a crucial mistake."

I was puzzled.

Then I remembered. When the Dead and the Lumberjack came in, she dropped a red box. Everyone was staring at it. She told me that the box—it looked like a plain, ordinary box to me—was an important item that many others had been searching for, and that her enemies must not know that she had found it and taken it out of the monastery. When she dropped it, she felt a chill, and that's when she realized that one of the people in the compartment was an enemy. She said she sensed malice. She said that if she didn't do something, the enemy would kill her and take the precious box before the Old Masquerade could reach its final destination.

I didn't know exactly what she was talking about, but I understood that she had some kind of mission and was risking her life to carry it out. I felt sorry for her. Such a young girl carrying out a dangerous mission. She was

only about seventeen years old. She should be going to school, chatting with her friends, and living happily with her parents. So I felt very, very sorry for her. Her eyes were bloodshot, her pale lips were quivering, and she was terrified by the presence of the enemy.

So even though I really didn't want to get involved, I told her, "Don't go off alone. Stay close to me. I'm just a normal lady. I'm not your enemy."

"Yeah. I don't think you're a spy for the enemy," she had replied. "I know that. You're like a mother."

I promised to help her, hiding the fact that I was actually the Empress of the Kingdom of Krehadl.

But I couldn't do anything for her in the end.

You know what happened after that. We went to the dining car and played a game of Pick a Raisin, and somehow she was the only one who ate the poisoned raisin. Who was the culprit? I don't know.

Ah, yes. As you said, it was the Orphan who suggested the game. It was the Lumberjack who brought the raisins, and it was the Dead who poured brandy on them. I was the one who spun the empty bottle to decide who goes next.

What?

No.

No one knew who would get which raisin. It was all a coincidence.

The Orphan continued acting like she was crazy. She thought that if she made a fuss about the presence of an enemy, it would be hard for them to target her. But it did not work. In full view of the public, an unknown murderer poisoned that poor girl. How horrible!

And then the train began speeding out of control.

I was so scared, I almost fainted.

...What?

I was laughing, you say?

I don't remember laughing. If I was laughing, it was because of fear. Inspector, can you please not look at me like I'm a pitiful, crazy lady?

...Yes.

What is it, Miss Gray Wolf?

Yes, you're right. I *did* talk about my kingdom during the game. Now that you mention it, why did I suddenly talk about Krehadl then?

That's what I'm wondering about.

You seem curious. Let me try to remember for you.

...

.....

.....

I remember now. I saw something that reminded me of the seawater all over the sky back home.

Saw what?

A glass.

Yes, the glasses we used. Not my glass, no. The Dead, the Lumberjack, and I were drinking wine. Red Bordeaux. Yes, but the glass I saw had clear liquid in it. So it was either the Vassal's or the Orphan's glass. They were drinking water.

Yes, the glass was very cold, with droplets all over it. It reminded me of the white surface of the sea in the sky back home. It looked a lot like the white sea foam I see when looking up from my underwater kingdom. And so, I rambled on about some silly memories.

What? Whose glass was it?

Like I said: either the Vassal's or the Orphan's.

What is it, Mr. Vassal?

Your glass of water wasn't cold? It must have been the Orphan's, then. It looked cold and refreshing.

The tide.

The seawater in the sky.

Hahaha.

Can I go now?

Really?

No. It was my honor to be of service. Thank you all for your hard work.

Oh, that reminds me.

What was that red box that she dropped?

It looked like an ordinary box to me, so I'm really curious about it. Why was she killed over such a thing?

A memento box?

Is that what it's called?

Hmm...

No.

It's, uh, it's nothing.

Uhm... Actually, I remember hearing the term “memento box” on the train.

I was walking down the corridor. It was just before we ran into Gray Wolf and the Vassal. There was a small room for communication, right? I was passing by it alone, when I heard a crackling sound, like a radio.

“Retrieve the box,” it said. “Someone on the train has it.”

Then came a reply. A deep voice. “Okay.”

But I don’t know whose voice it was. I think it was a man, but I’m not sure.

That’s all.

I hope that was helpful.

I see. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I’m sure that the Embassy of Krehadl will send someone to pick me up. Please show them to my room, then.

Adieu!



“If you’ll excuse me...”

The quiet-looking, middle-aged woman, plainly-dressed and wearing no makeup, stood up gracefully and bowed with the exaggerated motion of an actor descending from the stage.

“Adieu!”

Everyone in the room watched the lady go with a dumbfounded look. A tiny blonde girl sitting in a red fluffy chair in the corner cleared her throat. On behalf of the frozen Inspector Grevil de Blois, Kazuya, coming back to his senses, stopped the lady.

“Lady Britannia! Uh... Empress Britannia!”

Slowly the lady, Empress Britannia, turned around and regarded Kazuya with cold, emotionless eyes, like she was looking at a lowborn. She looked completely different from the gentle, caring woman he met on the train; she wore what seemed like an arrogant expression.

“What is it?” she asked.

Kazuya was briefly speechless.

What is this feeling? We already got off the Old Masquerade. We’re in Saubreme now.

He swallowed.

But she’s still as eerie as the character on the card. It’s like the masquerade ball is not yet over.

The Lumberjack, who on the train claimed that his sister had been kidnapped by the King of the Underworld, told the police that he was actually a university student from Saubreme. The rest of the passengers in that compartment supposedly just made up random stories.

But the Empress, like someone who had not woken up from a dream, continued claiming that she was the Empress of the Kingdom of Krehadl, even in front of the police.

Kazuya stared into the Empress’ brown eyes. Was she acting, after all? Or... If it was an act, what reason would she have for continuing this charade?

“Well, um...” Kazuya stammered. “Inspector.”

“What?” Inspector Blois blurted, taken aback.

“He needs everyone’s luggage inspected,” Kazuya said. “I beg your pardon, but could you also show us yours?”

“That will be fine.” Empress Britannia gave a sweet smile.

The skin under her eyes wrinkled slightly, making her look like an exhausted old woman. Or a pitiful, old mermaid who had lived for centuries in a kingdom under the sea.

Pulling himself together, Inspector Blois said, "Ah, yes. Luggage." He stood up and reached for Empress Britannia's suitcase.

In contrast to Gideon Legrant's girly suitcase, hers was large, rugged, and sturdy, almost as if it belonged to a man.

Kazuya opened the suitcase reluctantly.

His breath caught.

Victorique, smoking a pipe in the corner of the room, turned and gave him a wondering look.

Kazuya couldn't get the words out.

Empress Britannia's suitcase... was empty.

The large suitcase was empty, as though its contents had been swept away by the sea. The detectives were stunned.

"They seem surprised," the Empress said.

"I can... see why."

"This is my nightgown. It's made of silk."

She reached into the empty space and made a motion of taking something out like a skilled pantomime. Kazuya gaped at the Empress' hand.

In what should have been an empty spot, an elegant silk nightgown appeared and rippled softly in the wind. The owner of the invisible nightgown, Empress Britannia, regarded it with a loving look.

"Those are house slippers," she said. "It's covered in beads. I travel in this humble disguise, but when I sleep, I dress like the Empress that I am and go to bed in my lovely nightgown."

She held a pair of imaginary, delicate shoes with both hands, and smiled warmly once more. The mastery of her gestures stunned the detectives; they could almost see what wasn't supposed to be there. Their gazes darted back and forth between the Empress and the empty suitcase.

"Oh, I always read that Bible before I go to sleep," she continued. "I got it from my mother, and she received it from her mother. The Bible purifies the heart." She gave a soft chuckle. "There's an amber ring in that pocket, handed down from generation to generation. Oh, you all seem surprised. You didn't expect to find something so luxurious, did you? I understand."

Giggling, the Empress slammed the suitcase shut, the motion done wildly.

There was a loud slam, followed by a silence that filled the whole room. Empress Britannia smiled. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

Inspector Blois jumped to his feet. "Please wait in that room, uhm, Empress, while we interview the next witness."

All eyes were on the Empress as she left the room. The Empress kept her regal air the whole time. As the door slowly closed, Inspector Blois pulled on his drooping drill.

"Who the hell is that lady?" he mumbled to no one in particular. "Does anyone know? I'm not sure I buy the whole Empress thing. Maybe she's an actress? If that was acting just now, then she's incredibly good. She could receive an award in an opera in Paris. I've never seen such a brilliant pantomime performance anywhere. I mean, those graceful gestures."

Victorique silently puffed on her pipe.

"Feels weird," Kazuya said dubiously. "In the compartment, it was the Orphan who was crazy, not the Empress. But her statement just now revealed that the Orphan was just pretending. Now the Empress, who seemed like a normal person, insists that her story is true, even after getting off the train. Why would she do that? Is there a reason for her to pretend to be crazy like the Orphan?"

"Another boring remark from you," Victorique suddenly said.

Kazuya turned to her, irked. "Let's hear your thoughts, then."

"No."

"Wh-Why not?"

"It's too much trouble. Besides, there's still one witness left. He's a big deal, in a sense."

Victorique let out a yawn. She was beginning to get bored. Kazuya sat down and went deep in thought.

Inspector Blois approached, swinging the tip of his drill like a bird. "We'll just have to settle with your opinion, then, Kujou. I, the famed Inspector Blois, will lend you my ears, so I expect you to be grateful."

"Let me guess," Kazuya said wearily. "You're absolutely clueless."

"What?! O-Of course not!" He dropped his voice to a whisper. "I don't know what's going on with that Empress, though."

"Neither do I." Kazuya sighed.

He recalled the conversations he had had with his co-passengers on the train, and the expressions on each of their faces. Six passengers who just happened to bump into each other. One was killed, another tried to flee amid the chaos. One was carrying a luggage with peculiar contents, and one was crazy, or pretending to be crazy.

But all Kazuya could recall were their smiles, leaving him stumped.

“After listening to their statements,” he said slowly, “I’m beginning to wonder if it really was just pure coincidence that we ran into each other. The Orphan and the Empress saved me and Victorique, so I think us being in the same compartment was mere chance. But what about the Dead and the Lumberjack?”

“What do you mean?” the Inspector asked.

“According to Gideon’s statement, the Dead peeked into the compartment, thought it was empty, and entered. But is that really true? It’s possible that he knew the Orphan was there.”

“Hmm.”

“P-Please take it with a grain of salt. It just feels that way. Also, what exactly is in Gideon’s suitcase? It looks like a woman’s luggage. Perfume bottles and a portrait of a child. In contrast, Empress Britannia’s suitcase was for men, and surprisingly, contained nothing. Why wasn’t she carrying anything? Was it empty to begin with? Or did she just throw all her stuff away during the chaos?”

Kazuya sighed. He glanced at Victorique, who was puffing on her pipe with half-lidded eyes. She looked sleepy. *Must be because of my boring observation*, Kazuya thought dejectedly. But Inspector Blois leaned forward and urged him to continue, poking Kazuya repeatedly on the head with the tip of his drill-shaped hair.

“Stop! It hurts!”

“Speak, then.”

“I swear to God... Okay, then. I thought about the Pick a Raisin game. An impossible murder was committed. The Lumberjack brought the raisin, the Dead poured the brandy, and the Empress decided the order. No one would have been able to kill her. At least, not alone. And then I wondered, was it really a coincidence that we ran into each other?”

“What do you mean?”

“We met each other for the first time, and we introduced ourselves. But I’m not really sure if that was the first time we actually met. What if... What if they all conspired to lie? What if those three already knew each other beforehand? What if they were accomplices? Three jack of cards mixed with the deck.”

Inspector Blois stared at Kazuya dumbly. The detectives listened nervously.

“So what you’re saying is...”

“What I’m saying is: perhaps all the raisins were poisoned. I don’t know if it was the raisins or the brandy. Which raisin the Orphan chose was a matter of chance. None of them had any control of her actions. But if all of the raisins were poisoned, she’s dead no matter which one she picked.”

Kazuya dropped his voice lower. “It was the Empress who decided the order. Starting with the Lumberjack, then the Empress, then the Dead, then the Orphan, in that order. In other words...”

“In other words...?”

“I didn’t eat any raisins.”

“Aah...”

“What if all three of them were accomplices who just pretended to eat a raisin? Raisins are tiny. A piece is so small that you can hide it between your thumb and forefinger. Then it hit me... No, wait.”

Kazuya stared into the air, remembering something.

“What is it?” Inspector Blois asked. He was standing, ready to arrest all three of the suspects. “What’s with the stupid look on your face?”

“You’re the last person I expect to say that, Inspector.”

“I’m the farthest man away from being stupid,” the inspector said. “So, what is it?”

“I think my deduction’s wrong. I just remembered something. The Lumberjack and the Empress only ate one raisin each, but the Dead ate, like, five or six at once. He even burned his mouth. I think I saw him pick up a handful and put them in his mouth.”

Inspector Blois shook his head in disappointment. The detectives sat back down, mulling the matter over.

“Unbelievable... Got me all worked up for nothing.”

“I guess we’re back to square one.” Kazuya blushed a little, dejected.

Victorique, who had been silently dozing off, opened her eyes slowly. Her eyes, deep-green as a jewel, flickered.

“That was interesting,” she commented.

“...Really?” Kazuya’s face brightened a little. “It was a dumb deduction, but I’m glad it helped stave off your boredom.”

“Indeed. It was utterly dumb. And forget about the raisins.”

“What?Why?”

Inspector Blois shuffled over and gestured them to speak quietly.

“As a matter of fact, it doesn’t really matter where the poison was,” Victorique scoffed, munching on a pile of chocolate bonbons.

“What do you mean?”

“The key to solving the mystery is the ‘seawater in the sky’. What Empress Britannia shared was a cock-and-bull story, but she mentioned something very important in her statement. Go call the last witness.”

Inspector Blois rushed to his feet. “It seems my sister is enjoying playing detective,” he muttered, holding a doll. He then ordered his men to bring the Dead.

Victorique smiled faintly as she popped a few more chocolate bonbons into her tiny mouth. “From the Lumberjack’s pretty suitcase came a perfume bottle, a portrait of a child, and a dead insect,” she murmured. “In the Empress’s rugged, plain suitcase, an imaginary nightgown and an imaginary pair of slippers. And the Dead’s suitcase, presumably of fine quality, should reveal the most horrifying things.”

“What do you mean?”

“I believe it has a lot to do with his made-up story. Something unusual will pop up, a proof that the living and the dead had switched places,” she mumbled enigmatically, her green eyes blinking.

The door opened, and the Dead slowly entered.

A large, rugged body and a face covered in a beard. He wore a worn, shabby waistcoat and mud-stained boots. Unlike his clothes, the small suitcase in his hand looked expensive, the kind noblemen used.

Ever since Kazuya and Gideon caught him while he was trying to escape, his beard-covered, tanned face had been filled with anxiety. Currently, he was flanked on all sides by brawny detectives to prevent him from escaping. Sometimes he frowned in embarrassment.

When he was ordered to sit down, he reluctantly obeyed. Sitting with his legs spread wide, he crossed his arms as if he were in a meeting, and glanced at Inspector Blois.

Kazuya sensed the man's behavior to be different from that of the two previous witnesses. Gideon and Empress Britannia had not immediately grasped the situation in the room, the former looking around restlessly, the latter refusing to look at anything. However, as soon as the Dead sat down and looked up, he seemed to grasp who was in charge. He stared straight at Inspector Blois, his stiff beard quivering menacingly. The inspector held the Dead's gaze.

But...

Kazuya stared at the Dead's face.

He doesn't know.

He swallowed.

Who's actually in-charge...

Kazuya glanced at the little girl sitting in the pretty red chair in the corner, smoking a pipe while studying the Dead—Victorique de Blois, a Gray Wolf with formidable intellect, gently wrapped in a green taffeta dress, her magnificent blonde hair hanging to the floor. As though masking her presence, she stayed still like a carefully-displayed doll, silently smoking her pipe. Only the thin wisp of smoke rising from the white ceramic pipe indicated that she was not a doll, but a breathing, living person. The Dead man glared at Inspector Blois, oblivious to the real master of the room, his greatest enemy, the great detective Victorique.

"First, introduce yourself," the inspector said sharply. "And none of the tall tale you shared aboard the Old Masquerade. Who are you? Who killed that girl and how? And last but not the least, why did you try to escape?"

The Dead was glowering at Inspector Blois with a dangerous look in his eyes, as though he wanted to beat him to death. He clicked his tongue. Detectives held him down from both sides.

The Dead took a deep breath.

"My name is Sam O'Neil," he hissed. "I'm British. I've been working in the mines for a long time. What? Which coal mine? Does it matter?"

The Dead's Statement

My name is Sam O'Neil. I'm British. I've been working in the mines for a long time. What? Which coal mine? Does it matter?

Why did a coal miner like me go to the show at the monastery? I don't like your tone, mate. Who cares? What? I'm obligated to tell you? Hmph. It wasn't really that big of a deal. I won a bet. I'm good with cards. I make a little money gambling in London pubs. I-I don't cheat! You're one rude bloke! Gambling is all about luck. And, well, you know... brains. I may not be educated, but I'm not daft.

Anyway, a bloke lost to me last week, and he didn't have any money, so he gave me a ticket to the show instead. I decided to unwind and take a ride on the Old Masquerade. I didn't know I'd get involved in a murder case, though.

Why did I leg it? I, uhh... didn't want to get dragged into this mess. Imagine getting detained by the coppers, asked stupid questions, and not being able to go home. It's awful. I have to go back to the mines and work my arse off to earn a living.

Which coal mine? Why does it matter?

You want to talk about last night?

I'll keep it brief, then. I mean, I didn't even see anything. I'd like to know what happened myself.

What?

I'm a suspect?! Why?! I'd never even met the victim before! We were complete strangers. Fine. Okay, I'll talk. You happy?

Uh, where do I start?

Why me and the Lumberjack were together?

Oh, that.

He was crying.

In the corridor. Imagine that, a man, crying. I asked him if he was hungry. Then he just dumped a serious matter at me.

His sister was missing.

Oh, yeah. That's right. He told me his name the first time I met him. Gideon. So I was the only one who knew his real name.

Gideon Legrant.

And then it hit me. You don't know what I'm talking about? And you're supposed to be a police inspector? Pull yourself together, man. Haven't you heard about the missing Miss Legrant in Saubreme? What is it, little miss Gray Wolf? Yeah, that's it. It was on the paper. A quiet girl with long black hair. She just disappeared all of a sudden, and her family's worried about her. Yup. You're a sharp one. The family referred to in the paper was Gideon Legrant, the Lumberjack. He was sobbing, saying he couldn't live if his sister didn't return. He told me that when his parents were killed in a train accident, a nobleman took them in, so they lived a good life, but his sister was the only family he had left. Despite sharing his personal story, he never did tell me why he was on the Old Masquerade when I asked him. He just said he had his reasons.

Anyway, I thought I had just met a strange fellow. But I couldn't just leave him, so I decided to find us some seats. You know, sit down, play cards to distract himself, so he stops moping around forever. He's a man, after all.

So, after wiping his tears, he and I searched for an empty compartment. What?

Why did we enter that compartment?

Gideon said I opened the door thinking it was empty?

Y-Yeah...

Did I? Wait, let me remember.

Nah, I don't think so...

Ah, that's right. When we passed by the compartment, I caught a glimpse of a girl with dark hair for a moment. Yes, the murdered crazy Orphan. What, she wasn't crazy? I find that hard to believe. She was totally out of her mind. It was an act? Well, color me surprised. But why? It looked like a textbook case of hysteria to me. You know Freud's theory? The psychoanalyst? Something about blocking out unpleasant experiences. Her exaggerated speech and deranged screaming perfectly fit the theory... Nah, never mind.

Anyway, I saw the dark-haired girl and moved to the door. Yes, Gideon's sister was on my mind. I wondered if she was on the train. Before I could

really think about it, I told him the compartment was vacant, only to find the girl's dark hair cut short at the shoulders, and there were three other passengers with her. As we were about to leave, the lady, the Empress, stopped us.

Since it was a compartment with women and kids, I thought Gideon would be too embarrassed to keep crying. So we settled down. And you know what happened next. I was trying to get us to know each other, but they started making weird introductions. I had no choice but to play along. I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I quickly used the legend of the "Masque of the Black Death" from the monastery. It was well-received, surprisingly. I ended up calling myself the Dead.

What?

No. I made it all up, of course. I mean, isn't that what everyone was doing?

What's that?

The Empress insists she was telling the truth?

Unbelievable! Why?

She seemed like a decent lady. No signs of hysteria, with the presence of mind you'd expect from someone her age. I have no idea how she could say that.

Anyway, we introduced ourselves, and then I stepped out for a bit to get a change of clothes for the Gray Wolf and her Vassal, before coming back. I hate bugs. What? What do bugs have to do with anything? There was a spider in the compartment. It was right there from the start, creeping on the floor when I first came in. It was creepy.

You remember, don't you, little Gray Wolf?

The black-and-white spider was on the Vassal's head, and you were trying to get rid of it. But you couldn't quite reach it, so your face went beet red. Unfortunately the Vassal was oblivious and got angry instead. It was pretty funny. I mean, there was a huge spider stuck to his forehead, you know? When the Gray Wolf slapped him, the spider fell to the floor and started crawling around again. It made me restless. I couldn't let women and children see a big man afraid of insects. So I immediately invited the Lumberjack to join me and retreated to the dining car. Then the Vassal came, followed by the Empress and the Orphan, and for some reason we ended up playing a game of Pick a Raisin.

And then, it was just chaos after that.

Hmm?

What is it, little Gray Wolf?

Wine? Yeah, we were drinking. Me and the Lumberjack.

When the other three came, the Lumberjack brought glasses for all three of us. Like this: two in his right hand and one in his left. He was holding them by the legs upside down. Then he placed the glasses in front of us. He poured wine for the Empress. The Orphan and the Vassal wanted water, so I poured that for them. As for the water, I think it was on the table from the start.

Was the Orphan's glass cold?

What a weird question to ask, little Gray Wolf. I have no idea. I didn't touch it. I'm sure the Lumberjack would know. Hmm? Did I notice any droplets of water on the Orphan's glass? I don't remember. Hey, Vassal, do you remember? Right? You can't expect anyone to remember tiny details like that.

Anyway, the Orphan suggested a game over a glass of water, and we all decided to play. The Lumberjack, the Empress, and I ate some raisins. Everything was all right. I *did* burn my mouth, though. Next was the Orphan's turn to eat a raisin.

Then she started groaning in pain.

She then bolted away, coughing, and when I tried to stop her, the Vassal shouted that she had a gun. Sure enough, we heard a gunshot from the other side of the door. And then rest is as you know.

For some reason, the Empress started laughing, and all I could think about was getting away.

What? I said something about not wanting people around?

Did I?

I don't remember. I wanted to get away because I didn't want to get involved in any trouble. I just wanted to go home. That's all.

I swear I'm telling the truth.

What did you say, Gray Wolf?

Freud? What about him?

Where did I read about Freud's theories? Am I too educated for a coal miner? That's just your prejudice talking. I don't read books. I must have heard it in a pub somewhere.

College? No, I didn't go to college. I swear.

I'm actually highly educated?

I'm too different on the outside than I am on the inside?

As though the soul of an educated dead man is inside the body of a commoner?

What are you talking about? Oh, come on. That story about the dead was just a lie that I made up on the spot. What you see is what you get. I'm not hiding anything.

You've been interrupting a lot, little Gray Wolf.

Is she even allowed to do this, Inspector? She is?

What?

Open my luggage?

No! I refuse to!

Damn it! No! Hey, wait, stop! Don't do it! Don't open it! You're not...

You're not opening that suitcase! Fuck! You're all dead. I'm gonna kill you! Every last one of you!

You'll regret opening that suitcase!

I said stop!

Bloody hell! Bloody hell!

Stoop!



“Bloody hell! Bloody hell!”

Five detectives subdued the rampaging man. Abruptly, the room was in an uproar. Inspector Blois, a pipe in one hand and an extravagant porcelain doll in the other, scurried into the corridor. The large man’s roars, loud enough to burst one’s eardrums, echoed throughout the police station.

“Stop!”

The Dead, his bearded face twisted in anger and panic, continued shouting. Only when a young detective punched him in the nose did he close his mouth, shocked.

He shot a resentful glare at the detective, then at the person who suggested the luggage inspection—the little blonde girl, Victorique, whom he had not paid the slightest heed when he entered the room.

“Damn... it... I’ll get you for this!”

A drill’s tip peeked in from the corridor. The golden beak shook, as though wondering if it was safe. Inspector Blois fearfully peered into the room.

“It’s safe now,” Kazuya said.

“Hmm.” The inspector returned to the room with a scowl on his face. “I can take him, but I thought I’d leave it to the young ones.”

“You siblings sure are confident about a lot of things,” Kazuya mumbled.

Victorique kicked Kazuya’s ankle hard with her silver boots. Kazuya jumped up and down, holding his leg, his face red.

“Ouch! That hurts!”

“That’s for running your mouth,” Victorique muttered.

“You should be thanking me I didn’t tell your weird brother that you fired a gun with so much confidence despite never having touched one before. I said it hurts!”

Kazuya jumped up and down on one leg again.

Victorique sulked for a while, her face crimson. Then she stood up and approached the suitcase of the Dead curiously. She brought her face closer, cautiously, like a kitten finding something suspicious, and sniffed it. Her tiny, adorable nose twitched.

The Dead watched her anxiously.

“Kujou,” Victorique called. “Why are you hopping around like a flea? Trying to get some exercise?”

“My ankle’s really sore from your kick. What is it?”

“Open this suitcase.”

“Okay.”

Kazuya came hopping toward her, rubbed his ankles with teary eyes, and put his hand on the suitcase. The Dead howled. Startled, Kazuya paused for a moment, then opened the suitcase without hesitation.

It was a fine, nobleman’s suitcase. Inside were clothes. A silk shirt, well-tailored trousers, and a matching waistcoat. There was also a gentleman’s hat that was so delicately crafted, it would have cost around a miner’s one-month wage.

Kazuya methodically laid out the contents on the table.

Under the clothes...

...were rolls of banknotes.

It was a huge sum of money, enough to buy a castle. The detectives were abuzz. Kazuya’s hands quivered as he took them all out.

“What’s this?”

The last item to emerge from the suitcase was a bundle of documents, bearing a name in a smooth handwriting.

Kazuya picked it up. “Jason Neal. Wait, that’s not his name.”

“Did you say Jason Neal?!” Inspector Blois exclaimed.

Kazuya glanced up and looked around. The detectives were all looking in his direction, bewildered. While all the adults were left stunned, Victorique alone remained calm, smoking her pipe casually.

The Dead howled again.

One by one, the detectives rushed to the suitcase and snatched the papers from Kazuya’s hands.

“I can’t believe it!”

“Didn’t this guy try to run away? His name matches the wanted driver. Go verify it!”

Young detectives dashed out of the room.

“What’s going on?” Kazuya asked the inspector. “Who is Jason?”

Inspector Blois paced back and forth. “Jason Neal is the name of a tycoon who was murdered about a week ago. He was a mining magnate who made his fortune in just one generation. He was found dead in a forest on the outskirts of London, his car burnt to a crisp along with him. His driver is missing. He probably killed the man for his money.”

“I see...”

The case was featured on the newspaper lying on the floor of the compartment they were in. A wealthy man was killed... and then the Empress was gossiping about various things. The Dead entered the compartment and stomped on the newspaper, crumpling it up. Kazuya thought he was trying to get rid of the spider crawling on it, but it might have been because he wanted to keep the passengers’ eyes off the article about the murder he committed.

A young detective came running back. “Inspector, we’ve asked a colleague of the missing driver to come. They will identify whether he’s the man wanted for killing Jason Neal.”

“Good work!” Inspector Blois said. “Take him away for now, and keep him under tight security.”

The Dead roared again and began thrashing about. Four detectives held the big man down and dragged him out of the room.

Only three people remained in the room—Inspector Blois, Victorique, and Kazuya.

“I see,” Inspector Blois muttered in exasperation. “So he was a culprit in another case. That’s why he tried to sneak away after the train stopped. That man—the driver who killed his boss—had another reason for not wanting to get involved with the police.”

“Wrong,” Victorique murmured, smoking her pipe languidly. Her deep-green eyes narrowed. “He’s dead in a certain way. The facts have been flipped.”

“What? What do you mean by that?”

“Good question.” Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth, and sighed.

From outside the window came the hustle and bustle of the city of Saubreme. Horses’ hooves clattering on the pavement. Horns blaring. The murmur of people walking past, and the sound of an accordion played by a street performer.

Victorique puffed on her pipe in silence.

“Inspector! Inspector Blois, we’ve got trouble!”

A detective came scuttling into the room. Inspector Blois, who had been staring at his sister, turned his attention to the man. The inspector’s eyes were dark and moist, like a child who had woken up from a nightmare.

“What is it?” he asked. “Don’t tell me that man got away.”

“No.” The detective’s face tightened. “We just received a strange inquiry!”

“What is it about?”

“Well, uhh...” The detective fumbled for words.

“Spit it out already.”

“R-Right. They’re looking for Empress Britannia. They’re wondering if she’s in our custody.”

“...What?” Staring at the detective, Inspector Blois cocked his head. “What’s going on? I thought the kingdom of Krehadl was just something she made up.”

“We’re absolutely clueless.”

“Whatever. I’ll deal with it.”

Inspector Blois left with the detective, leaving Victorique and Kazuya alone in the room. Kazuya studied Victorique’s face for a while. Then he stood up and walked over to her side. Slowly, he held out his forefinger.

And poked her cheek.

“Don’t touch me!” Victorique snapped.

“S-Sorry. It was just so puffy.”

“I’ve never puffed out my cheeks.”

“You do it all the time.”

“What?!”

“By the way...” Kazuya paused, uneasy.

Victorique eyed him eerily. “What is it?”

“Sorry I got mad and left you alone on the train. So there was a spider, huh? I had no idea.”

Victorique sniffed sharply. “Oh, that?” She looked away. Her golden hair swayed, glinting in the sunlight shining through the window. “A big, creepy spider was crawling on the top of your head, Kujou, then scuttled down to your forehead, crossing from right to left. It was traveling across your face as hard as a group of Puritans crossing to the New World. Eastward, to the Promised Land. How you didn’t notice it is a mystery to me.”

“How embarrassing. My mind was somewhere else. So you got rid of it for me.”

Victorique was silent.

Kazuya poked his face from behind and saw her face red. “Thanks,” he said with a smile.

“Hmm.”

Just then the door opened and Inspector Blois returned. Striding straight to Victorique, he said, “Kujou.”

“I’m right over here, inspector,” Kazuya said. “We look completely different. There’s no way you’d mistake her for me. Not only are we of different genders, we’re also of different races. But what is it?”

“Kujou.” Inspector Blois pretended to be talking to Kazuya. “K-Kujou.”

“I said, what is it?”

“One of the passengers in the same compartment as you, the Dead, is likely a culprit in another case. We are sending a witness over here now. I have no idea who the Empress is, but a party is on its way here now, looking for an Empress Britannia. But the case I need solved is neither the murder of a mining tycoon nor the mystery of Empress Britannia. It’s the puzzling Murder in the Old Masquerade. Who’s the culprit, um, Kujou?”

“I’m guessing you’re asking Victorique, not me. Victorique, you don’t have to answer this albatross-looking guy.”

“No one asked you, Kujou.”

“You always do this. Asking her for help, then taking all the credit.”

“Who’s the culprit? It’s obviously Gideon,” Victorique groaned.

Kujou and Inspector Blois paused their squabbling, and turned to her.

“What? Gideon’s the culprit?” Kazuya asked.

Inspector Blois watched Victorique nervously.

Victorique popped a chocolate bonbon into her mouth listlessly. “Yes.” She chewed. “Did you not realize it when he was giving his statement?”

Inspector Blois wiggled his body around like a master escape artist and broke free from Kazuya’s grasp. He then sprinted out of the room, his drill-shaped hair glinting, leaving Kazuya and Victorique alone once more.

“He didn’t seem like a bad person,” Kazuya mumbled, perplexed. “He looked like a normal college student.”

“This just means that crimes are not always driven by evil.”

“What do you mean? If not evil, then what?”

“Probably by something that everyone harbors in their hearts. Weakness. But we must never succumb to it.” Victorique gave a big yawn. “It is not

evil, but weakness that can drive people mad and make them lose what is precious to them forever.”

“Precious? Like what?”

“The things we love. Pride... And beautiful memories.”

Inspector Blois returned with rattled footsteps. He had brought Gideon Legrant, the Lumberjack, with him. Gideon entered the room with a surprised look on his face and, following the inspector’s instructions, sat down in a chair.

Inspector Blois fixed his gaze on the young man. He glanced at Kazuya. “Go ahead, Kujou. Solve the mystery.”

“No way. I can’t do that. I don’t know anything. Ask Victorique instead.”

“Ask her for me, then. Bow to her, cry rivers of tears as you accept all the humiliating conditions she imposes. Beg for her help like it’s the end of the world.”

“Now, look here...”

Victorique chuckled.

Gideon watched them curiously, wondering what was going on. “You’re the famous Grevil de Blois, right?” he asked. “Admired by many, featured in the papers for solving several difficult cases. So why are you asking this little Gray Wolf for help?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

“Wait, don’t tell me...”

“No! Well, it’s a bit of a long story.”

Victorique spoke not to the jittery Inspector Blois, but to Kazuya, who watched her curiously.

“It’s too much effort, but I will solve the mystery to clear your name. You should thank me, with tears in your eyes. If you’re arrested, you’ll be thrown into prison, where rats will chew on you, and you will end up looking like cheese with countless holes. You will spend every day wailing and crying, calling out my name.”

“Hmm... Yeah, I can see it. I’ll feel lonely and call your name. While being gnawed by rats.”

“Of course,” Victorique declared proudly. “First of all,” she began, “recall the time when the Orphan was poisoned. The key to this case is the ‘seawater in the sky’ that the Empress mentioned. How did the poison get

into the victim's mouth? The Lumberjack did not poison the raisins. And the Dead did not poison the brandy. Therefore, the order of the game had nothing to do with the murder. And it goes without saying that the Empress deciding the order holds no significance in the case."

Her low, husky voice reverberated in the room.

Gideon himself was listening closely to Victorique's reasoning, as though entranced, his face betraying an unconcealable curiosity. He watched the little girl present her deduction with great interest.

Inspector Blois, on the other hand, was restless, a doll sitting on his lap, anxiously wondering if anyone would return to the room.

"The poison was not in the raisins," Victorique said.

"Then where was it?"

"Think back. Three adults drank wine and two kids drank water. The Orphan ate a raisin and took a sip."

"Uh-huh."

"What's poisoned... was the glass of water!"

Inspector Blois inclined his drill. Restlessly smoking his pipe, he said, "How? Kujou drank the same water."

"Yes. He did drink the same water. But he had a different glass."

"But the Orphan took a sip earlier and she was fine," Kazuya countered.

Victorique put her cherry lips to the pipe and fell silent. Then slowly, she took her mouth off the pipe.

"When the Lumberjack brought the glasses, he was carrying them upside-down, holding the legs, which he couldn't do unless they were empty. But..."

Inspector Blois turned to the corridor. It was becoming noisy outside.

"It's not impossible to plant poison in only one glass, while making it appear empty. The key to solving this mystery is the Empress' story. 'Sky filled with seawater'. Only the Orphan's glass was cold, with lots of water droplets on its surface. The only person who could decide which glass went to whom was the Lumberjack, Gideon Legrant. In other words, you."

Gideon glanced at the corridor. Once again, he was acting restless, as though waiting for something. Waiting for help to come. Victorique watched him with narrowed eyes.

The door opened, and Gideon's face lit up.

“Inspector Blois!” A young detective burst into the room and whispered something to the inspector.

“The witness is here? Good!” Inspector Blois nodded. Gideon looked dejected.

Inspector Blois quickly turned to leave, but then scuttled back and whispered to Victorique, “Pause on the deduction. I’ll be right back. Wait for me, got it?” He then scurried away, his footsteps fading into the distance.

Only Victorique the Gray Wolf, her vassal Kazuya, and Gideon, the killer, were left in the room.

Gideon kept glancing at the door uneasily.

“It would seem that the person you’re waiting for is taking their sweet time, Gideon,” Victorique muttered in a somewhat amused tone.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Gray Wolf. I’m not waiting for anyone.”

“I know, Lumberjack.” Victorique smiled thinly. “You’re waiting for your trump card—the king of the underworld.”

Gideon chuckled in response. “Come on. I just made that up. Went along with everyone else. There’s no king of the underworld.”

“No. You’re waiting for the king of the underworld to come and rescue you from this predicament, Gideon. You think I wouldn’t notice? The way you look at me, like I’m something horrifying, yet something you’re familiar with. I’m well aware of your situation, Gideon, spy for the Ministry of the Occult. You’re the one who killed the Orphan, a spy working for the Academy of Science, and took the contents of the memento box. You are the Jack.”

“What?!” Kazuya exclaimed.

Victorique and Gideon turned to Kazuya at the same time. They stared at him with moist eyes, as though a magic spell had been broken.

Kazuya turned crimson. “What do you mean? I thought the red box was empty.”

“This man secretly removed the contents. That’s why it was empty.”

“What? But Gideon didn’t have anything suspicious. We checked his luggage.”

“Remember, Kujou! Use that pumpkin, spider-attracting, head of yours! Listen closely. According to the Dead, a memento box is a condensed

version of a man's life. Whenever something memorable happens, the box is filled with items, and when the box is full, the man's life ends. It's an ancient custom, but probably still practiced in places where they live the same, old lifestyle." Victorique took a puff. "Like for example, the settlement deep in the mountains, where people have lived in seclusion since ancient times and hold traditional festivals—the home of the Gray Wolves, the Nameless Village."

"The Nameless Village?!"

The Nameless Village was a mysterious village located deep in the mountains, where life was the same as it was in the Middle Ages. Kazuya had followed Victorique there after she secretly snuck out of St. Marguerite Academy around summer this year. Many of the people there had golden hair and blue eyes. They were beautiful and incredibly intelligent. They were driven away from Eastern Europe long ago after losing a war, and had continued to live the same old lifestyle deep in the mountains of Sauville ever since. Victorique's mother, Cordelia Gallo, was born in the village, where she was accused of murder and banished when she was younger, and later gave birth to Victorique.

Cordelia had hidden something under the floor of her house. Later, Cordelia's partner, Brian Roscoe, took it out of the village and hid it in the monastery. That something was the memento box—an item that the Academy of Science and the Ministry of the Occult were fighting over.

"In her dying breath, the Orphan said: 'The Ministry of the Occult must not have Jupiter Roget's memento box.' Jupiter is a leading figure in the Academy of Science, and the Orphan worked for them. From here, the whole picture of the dreadful conflict begins to emerge. The memento box taken from the Nameless Village, home to the Gray Wolves, belongs to Jupiter Roget. It's the most conclusive proof that the leading figure of the Academy of Science, who rejects the occult more than anyone else, and wants to usher in the age of machines and science, is in fact, a Gray Wolf himself."

Astounded, Kazuya glanced between Victorique and Gideon. As usual, Victorique was cool and expressionless, but Gideon's eyes glinted sharply as he stared fixedly at Victorique. His face still displayed the same friendly expression.

“What does this mean? So you’re saying that a key figure of the Academy of Science, a Gray Wolf like you, creatures talked about in legends, has been hiding his true identity? That the memento box was the Academy’s weak point, so the Ministry of the Occult was searching for it, and Cordelia and Brian, for their own safety, kept the memento box hidden as a political trump card?”

“That is correct. All they knew was that the memento box was hidden somewhere in the monastery during the Great War. That is why my father, Marquis de Blois, lured my mother Cordelia to find the box. He imprisoned me, made me suffer, and waited for my mother to come to my rescue.”

“But... But the box was empty.”

“And I said, Gideon stole the contents in the middle of the chaos. He didn’t need the box. Only what was inside.”

“But we checked his stuff.”

“Now, then. Let us reconstruct the fragments of Jupiter Roget’s life using my Wellspring of Wisdom. It should help stave off my boredom. It goes without saying that his life is not over yet. His memento box represents an incomplete history, containing only items up to the time of his departure from the Nameless Village.”

Victorique reached for Gideon’s suitcase. He did not stop her. With sharp eyes, he continued watching the little Gray Wolf, not missing a single word or movement from her.

Victorique opened the suitcase. Her tiny, chubby hands rummaged through Gideon’s luggage. She tossed out the clothes and textbooks. Kazuya picked them up and placed them neatly on the table. She found a dead insect, which Gideon said he used to scare his sister, and grabbed it.

“He’s born!” she exclaimed.

Kazuya stared blankly at the dried, worm-like thing. “What are you on about?”

“You thick-headed buffoon!” Victorique stamped her feet. Her cheeks bulged a little. “I’m saying a baby Jupiter Roget is born. This is the first and most memorable item in his memento box.”

“What? I’m not sure I follow.”

“Use your eyes.”

“You mean this dead insect?”

“You idiot. Fool. Pumpkinhead. Look closely.”

Kazuya studied the thing in Victorique's hand intently. Victorique's tiny, pretty face was twitching, begging him no notice.

"Don't tell me..."

"Yes. This is not a dead insect. It's an umbilical cord."

Kazuya yelped. "Really? Huh..."

"Moving on. Jupiter Roget is already born."

Victorique tossed the umbilical cord onto the table. Kazuya quickly picked it up and placed it neatly on the table.

"He's all grown up. Here's a portrait of him as a child."

She tossed the portrait of a small boy standing in the forest. Kazuya caught it in the air and laid it down properly.

"Ah, right," Kazuya said. "That village is practically still in the Middle Ages, and no one seemed to have a camera. Which explains why a portrait, not a photograph."

"Good!"

"Jupiter's all grown up here."

"He fell in love!"

"What?" Kazuya blushed a little.

"Here." Victorique tossed a bottle of perfume, and Kazuya quickly caught it. A tiny perfume for women.

Kazuya stared at the pretty, delicate bottle. "I see. So this belonged to a lady he fell in love with. A memento of love. What kind of woman was she?"

"It's not a super fancy item. But sophisticated, nonetheless. The owner must have been the same."

Kazuya gently placed the perfume bottle on the table. His touch was soft, as though silently paying his respects to an unfamiliar young man's love.

"He suffered a setback!" Victorique said, finding a scrap of paper. The words "Never look back" were written on it.

Kazuya wondered what the short phrase meant. Was it related to love or his career? Or perhaps his family? Kazuya thought back to his own past. At the small setback he had back in his home country. He thought he would never look back, but he did, and eventually he left his home behind, and now here he was, alone with a friend from a foreign country. He was

reminded of his family's—his mother's and sister's—gentle smiles. He quickly shook his head to stop the tears from falling.

Victorique watched him warily. “Jupiter left. His memento box ends here. In short, this is an unfinished box, and unfinished life. We can easily guess what Jupiter did next. I wonder, how can you condense so much of one's life into a tiny box?”

On the table lay small items that held completely different substance from when they first saw them. At first glance, they appeared to be nothing more than a worthless pile of trifling junk. But when stuffed into the red memento box, they quickly became a miniature representation of someone's invaluable life. A man's birth, his growth, love and failure, seemed to exist right there in the damp air.

It was almost as if they could hear someone's voice crying out.

I was born!

I lived!

I loved!

I fought!

And I left!

The secret past of Jupiter Roget, when he was but a lonely young man, revealed only to a twenty-something youth and two kids.

Victorique and Kazuya regarded the table. They stared silently at the emergence of a young man, his birth, his growth, his failures.

And then the young man left the village of his birth alone, Kazuya thought.

He crossed that drawbridge. Left the village surrounded by greenery, a village that had stayed the same for centuries. An ominous, walled village full of Gray Wolves. Did he know that he would never return? Why did he climb up the ranks of the Academy of Science, a new force that denied the mysterious old power symbolized by the Gray Wolf? He was a man who had no idea what his destiny was at the moment. But this would not happen until long into the future. He had no idea what fate had in store for him. He simply looked back, and left his homeland behind. He descended the deep mountain, alone, hungry by day and frightened by the presence of beasts by night. Still he continued down. He had to.

Something that happened a long time ago.

He was now a grown man.

How was his life in the city after that? He found work, he studied, and over the years he worked his way up from the bottom of society. What did he think of the Great War that eventually broke out, of a world tossed about by a raging storm, of the shadow cast by the deaths of countless young men?

A memento box of the unfinished life of Jupiter Roget, a leading figure in the Academy of Science, its secrets revealed, yet still holding a deep mystery.

Inspector Blois' voice came from the corridor.

"What's all the fuss about?" Kazuya muttered as he stood up. He looked out the door to see what was going on in the corridor.

Victorique was silently puffing on her pipe.

A thin wisp of white smoke drifted toward the ceiling.

Gideon was staring at Victorique. His eyes were gleaming from either hatred, anger, frustration. Or perhaps resignation. The fierce side that he had kept hidden, maintaining a carefree attitude, crept onto his face.

Victorique ignored him for a while. Eventually she raised her head and smiled thinly. She was as cool and expressionless as always. Her lips, glossy as cherries, parted.

"Gideon," she said. "You barely lied when you gave your statement."

"I swore an oath, after all. I wouldn't lie."

Gideon's voice was low and cold, like he was a different person.

"Hmm. You certainly did not. You simply omitted a lot of things."

"I didn't think I needed to voice my thoughts."

Victorique and Gideon glared at each other. A wisp of white smoke rose from the pipe towards the ceiling.

Victorique slowly opened her mouth. "You used ice, didn't you?"

Gideon's eyes glinted. "Hah. Hahahaha. That's right. The poison was inside the ice. I thought I didn't need to say more than necessary. And I would've gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you. How ironic is it that Marquis de Blois' daughter herself boarded the Old Masquerade and solve the truth behind the murder. Did you know? That the man behind this, the trump card known as the king of the underworld, was none other than Marquis Albert de Blois?"

Victorique did not answer. Her green eyes gleamed as she stared at Gideon.

“I thought I heard your thoughts,” she said. “While you were giving your statement.”

“I see. You saw through everything. That’s incredible.”

Gideon snorted. He gazed at Victorique’s petite figure, wrapped in a luxurious dress. Victorique held his gaze. Moments later, Gideon cast his eyes downward, wearing a vacant, contemplative look.

As though casting his mind back to his cheerful testimony.

As though repeating in his own mind each of the answers he gave earlier in this room, and the hidden thoughts that accompanied them.

The Murderer's Statement (With Their Thoughts)

My name is Gideon Legrant. *All right. Time to give a statement. I hope I don't slip up... I can't have them figure out that I'm the culprit before they arrive.* I'm a student of architecture at the University of Sauville. That's right. It goes without saying that I am not, in fact, a lumberjack. But everyone was lying about their identities, calling themselves the Orphan, or the Empress, so I followed their lead and gave a false occupation. They laughed at me, though.

All right. Good start. Doesn't look like they suspect me.

I live in a boarding house in Saubreme. Yes. What I told that oriental boy right there, Kujou, was true. I lost my parents in a train accident when I was a child, and since then, my adoptive father has been funding my studies. *Yeah, if only they knew about my adoptive father...* I've been trying to repay him for my tuition fees in various ways. I can't just mooch off of him, you know. *And that's how I got into this mess.*

The reason I took the train was, well... *Is he here yet? ...like everyone else, I went to watch the show at the monastery. He should know about my situation by now.* I got a ticket through some connections. *If they arrest me, all of this would've been for nothing. I should be getting help from the Ministry of the Occult by now.* Was the show interesting? *The Ministry should have contacts in the police. Just one word, and I'll be out of here.* To be honest, I don't know. *I'm so distracted, I don't know what they're asking. Am I speaking properly?* The ladies seemed to really enjoy it, though.

...Hmm?

I'm acting restless? *Ah, shit!* No, I'm not.

I am?

This little girl is watching me closely. I gotta watch out for her. She is, after all, a real Gray Wolf. I've heard the rumors. The Ministry of the Occult is all abuzz with talk about her. Marquis de Blois gave birth to a

wolf with formidable intellect. I didn't expect her to be so small and frail. Damn it! What's taking you so long, Marquis Albert de Blois?!

I mean, I can't relax. I've never given a statement at a police station before. Besides, I saw a person die right in front of me. It'd be weird if I was calm, no?

Yeah, I'm fine. I'm fine. I've calmed down. Moving on.

Calm down, me. Speak properly. Talk like a random college kid caught up in a case. Don't let them know that you're an agent of the Ministry of the Occult.

It was pure coincidence that I ended up in that compartment. The train was awfully crowded, and there were people everywhere. I ran into a man wandering around, looking for a seat, a large guy who called himself the Dead. *I was crying at the time thinking about my sister. I can't believe a grownup saw me acting lame.* We were walking down the corridor, having a chat, when he looked into that compartment and said it was empty. So I went in, only to find that there were four other people there. It just so happened that the seat he spotted was empty, so he assumed there was no one inside. The woman who called herself the Empress let us in, and so we settled in that compartment. The Empress is nice. I kinda wish I had a mother like her. Childish, I know. It's embarrassing. I shouldn't have said that. *You're taking too long, Marquis de Blois! I went to the monastery as you ordered, found and killed the enemy who took the box, and now I have its contents in this suitcase! Where are you, Marquis?!*

...What?

I'm looking restless again?

No, I'm not.

Am I?

I must be doing it subconsciously, then. I just can't sit still. I mean, I'm in a room in a police station, surrounded by detectives. My legs have been shaking for a while now. I'm too faint-hearted, I guess.

I keep glancing at the door?

Am I waiting for someone to arrive?

What did you say? Um, I believe you introduced yourself as a Gray Wolf? Did you catch a cold? Your vassal was worried when you got your dress all wet. I was jealous of how close you two were. You remind me of

my sister. What? She's bigger than you. It reminded me of when we were kids. She was frail, too, and caught colds easily.

I screwed up. No more looking around. I just have to wait patiently for Marquis de Blois, King of the Underworld, to arrive.

Oh, sorry. Back to what happened. This girl keeps on pointing out how I keep on looking around. I'm not moving my head, then. I don't think I'm behaving suspiciously.

Does it bother you, Inspector?

I see. Good. If it doesn't bother you, then I suppose it's fine.

That's a nice hairdo. No, I'm not sweet-talking you. Individuality is important.

Uh, so, where were we?

Ah, yes. We were in the compartment with four other passengers.

One was a kind woman who called herself an Empress. She was very concerned about the girl next to her. And I mean *very*. The girl had dark hair and blue eyes, and was overall pale. She kept mumbling to herself. It was kinda creepy. *Her face looked familiar. The Ministry of the Occult has intel on the Academy of Science's spies. I knew the girl well. She was about my sister's age and had the same dark hair, which left a strong impression on me. Unlike me, she had been working as a spy with her parents since childhood. Poor girl, I thought. My sister and I lived a normal, happy life when we were younger, while she had been a spy from a young age. When I found her, I wanted to let her go. But...* She dropped a box? Ah, right. I think she did. A red box? Y-Yes, that's right. It was about the size of my palm. *Yes, she dropped a red box in front of me of all people. A memento box. An enemy spy had taken it from the monastery! At that moment, a switch in my mind flipped. It's an enemy! I had to get rid of her and take the contents of the box!* What kind of box was it? It was square, so it couldn't have been a pencil box. It was too plain for candies, too. Anyway, it had a strange design, now that I think about it.

My sister was taken hostage. I couldn't believe it. My love for my family became a liability. After losing our parents in a train accident, Marquis de Blois, an old friend of my father's, became our guardian and took care of us. But he only took us in so he could use us as spies for the Ministry of the Occult. Me, a university student, the son of an aristocrat, and my sister, still an innocent schoolgirl. We had the perfect cover. What's more, we were

willing to take any risk to protect each other. In a sense, Marquis de Blois is right. He has the power to achieve his goal and the madness to make sacrifices. That madness seems to be infecting me as well. My sister went missing last week in Saubreme, and I immediately reported it to the police. In truth, she was actually kidnapped by the Marquis. I knew that I had to carry out this mission to get my sister back. For my sister's safety, I had to get rid of this strange girl who looked just like her. Ah, I have to pay attention. If I show tears or choke on my words, they will suspect me.

And then there was this pretty girl right here and her oriental friend. We introduced ourselves to each other and started talking. First, the dark-haired girl, I don't know if she was neurotic or hysterical, but she opened with a rather spooky statement. She said she was an Orphan and she was looking for her birthday, which put the big guy in a bad mood. So the lady played along for her and introduced herself as an Empress. *I'm sure she just made that up.* I really like the lady. I thought she was like my mother. Oops, there I go again. I shouldn't have said that. How embarrassing. Anyway, I went along with them as well and said something about the king of the underworld and that I was a lumberjack and that I was traveling around chopping wood. *It's true. The King of the Underworld—Marquis de Blois—took my sister away from me, and I'm traveling around chopping wood—killing people. I didn't lie.* The big guy burst out laughing, and he started telling us his own story, using a tale from the monastery called The Masque of the Black Death. He told us that he was a dead man who had possessed the body of a man who had just died. I found his story most amusing. I couldn't help but laugh. *He clearly made that up as well. He wasn't dead; in fact, he seemed tough.*

And then he and these two kids here went out to change. I had a little chat with the Empress. But she had to calm down the crying Orphan, so I decided to leave for a bit.

As soon as I started walking down the corridor, I felt sick. What? Yes, that's right. You remember? How embarrassing. Yes. These two here saw me shaking because I wasn't feeling well. How did I get sick? I remembered my parents' train accident. When I was a child, I saw my parents fall off a runaway train and die. With my own eyes. You know how you can keep your mind off things when you're with others, but when you're alone, the thoughts come rushing like darkness. That's it. I felt dizzy

in the corridor and entered the nearest room. The communications room? Was it? Ah, right. I guess. It was a tiny room with communications equipment. *Yes, that room was a communications room, where I received orders from the Ministry of the Occult. The monastery had one too. Both the monastery and the Old Masquerade were under the control of the Ministry. I had received countless orders from Marquis de Blois in the communications room. Then I heard my sister's voice. Brother, help me, she cried. If I don't carry out my mission, she won't make it back safely.* But I'm not really familiar with them. Hmm? You heard a voice when you passed by? What did it say?

Brother, help me?

...

.....

.....

Quit joking. I didn't hear anything. *Shit. They heard?* The equipment wasn't working, and I didn't touch anything. *I have to fool them.* My head was pounding, and I felt so distressed, sad, and heartbroken that I felt like a different person. I felt suffocated in the small room, and as soon as I stumbled out, I ran into you guys. Yes, these two kids right here. They had just changed into the servers' uniform and were on their way back.

And then... Let's see...

I was so sick, my memory's a little fuzzy. I think I returned to the compartment, but then I went to the dining car with the Dead. I was feeling uneasy because the Orphan was crying and yelling about enemies or something. She said she was going to get killed, and I thought, I gotta stay away from her. Then she actually ended up getting killed. Maybe she was telling the truth about the whole enemy thing? If so, I should have listened to her instead of finding her annoying. It's too late for regrets, though.

While we were in the dining car, this oriental boy, the Vassal, the Empress, and the Orphan arrived. The Vassal was concerned about the Gray Wolf left in the compartment and wanted to leave, but he was forced to stay. The Dead and I had been drinking wine, so I prepared glasses for the other three. *The train is under the control of the Ministry of the Occult. I had prepared the glasses in advance in the dining car.* The waiters were too busy, and I didn't want to cause too much trouble by calling one. *I placed the tampered glass in front of the girl. To avoid suspicion, I carried the*

glasses upside down to let her know that it was empty. What she didn't know was that there was something at the bottom of the glass. The Empress drank wine too, while the other two had water, and while we were talking, the Orphan suggested a game called Pick a Raisin. *The Orphan took a sip of water from the tampered glass. But it didn't seem like she had ingested the poison just yet. She wasn't in pain. I just had to wait a bit.*

Who brought the bowl of raisins?

...

.....

It was me.

You must think I'm suspicious. Ah, my knees are shaking. But you're wrong. Besides, how would I know which raisin she would pick? What? Who brought the brandy? The Dead. But if the brandy had been poisoned, we would have all died.

Whose turn it was to pick a raisin was decided by spinning an empty bottle. I think it was the Empress who spun it. The bottle pointed to me, so I had to eat first. It was just pure coincidence.

What? She could've controlled the bottle?

I don't know.

But I don't think she did.

The Empress is not that kind of person.

Well, yes, of course. I've never met her before, but I'm sure she's a nice person.

Anyway, I ate the raisin and made a wish. Next was the Empress. She was very eager to tell us about how she had escaped from her country despite being an empress. Her identity was supposed to be made-up. She said that if she continued her journey, she would eventually miss her kingdom. She also mentioned that during the winter the sea turns white and the sky is filled with seawater. And that her subjects are waiting for her.

I have a good memory?

Well, yeah.

I was curious about what she said. What did she mean by the sky filled with seawater? I get that it's a seaside country, but the sky can't possibly be filled with seawater. It's the sky, not the sea.

No, that's all.

Next it was the Dead who picked up a raisin. Did he make some strange gesture? No, I don't think so.

I didn't really notice anything in particular. I wasn't paying close attention. I remember him sticking his hand into the flame, taking a handful of raisins, and then burning his mouth. The Empress said he only had to get one.

And then it was the Orphan's turn.

Nothing seemed off. She didn't do any weird gestures. She put her hand in the bowl, picked up a random raisin, and put it in her mouth. And then she started groaning in pain. *All right. She drank some water again. She ingested the poison!*

It was chaos after that.

She said her raisin was poisoned and then ran out of the dining car. The Vassal said she had a gun, much to my horror, and then we heard a gunshot from behind the closed door. With the lock broken, the door couldn't be opened. Then we heard a couple of gunshots coming from the driver's cab, and the train started going out of control. It was a nightmare. Memories of the accident when I was a kid had me shaking. Then the Vassal suddenly climbed out of the window onto the roof to get to the driver's cab. The situation was similar to when my parents died, so I tried my best to stop him. But he ended up kicking me off and going up to the roof.

I don't really know what happened after that.

I was just panicking. I can't remember.

I think someone, a woman, was laughing. Who was it? I don't know, maybe the Empress? But how in the world could she laugh in that situation? The Dead was petrified. I think he was mumbling something. This is bad, is what he said, I believe.

"This is bad. An incident like this will draw people."

Something like that.

What did he mean by that?

I have absolutely no clue.

I didn't ask. I was too scared. I thought I would just black out.

I never had a chance to wash the glass. I'm sure it would be brought to question.

I called my sister's name. *And then I had an idea. I secretly swapped the poisoned glass with one from a table a little farther away. I believed the*

only table that the police would examine was where the incident took place. I thought, “I don’t want to die in a train accident, too.”

I didn’t want to leave her alone. I can’t leave my frail sister alone in this fickle world.

A gunshot sounded in the distance. I closed my eyes and prayed. *I prayed that I would make it back to Saubreme safely. That I would get my sister back.*

One shot.

Two shots.

And then... another shot.

I prayed. I was praying while crying. *That I would get her back.* I think the woman was still laughing then. I don’t know who it was, though.

Please, give her back.

Give my sister back to me.

Eventually, the train stopped.

It seemed unreal.

I couldn’t really believe it at first. I thought the train had already crashed and was on fire. I thought I was dead, dreaming about being safe. I thought I was already in the underworld. I shivered like a little girl at the terrifying thought.

I climbed out of the same window that the Vassal used.

And then to my surprise, it was morning.

The pale morning sun was rising from the eastern sky, shining on my face. The train was stopped halfway up a hill. I could see the tracks below. We’re safe, I thought. Then I doubted it again. I ran. *I must get the memento box!* When I made it into the driver’s cab, I saw the Gray Wolf and her vassal. The Vassal was holding a gun.

I thought he looked way braver than me. He was younger, and he was from the Orient. I was a little ashamed of myself for thinking that he belonged to an inferior race. I felt a sense of friendship and camaraderie with a boy I had just met by chance and would probably never see again. As for the Gray Wolf, she was sitting on the floor. I saw the Orphan lying there. My sister was about the same age as her and had the same dark hair. It was as if my sister died for the train to stop. It was just a momentary impression, though. In that moment, the Gray Wolf whispered something to the dying, convulsing Orphan.

What did you say to her?

Keeping it to yourself, I see.

I heard a bit of what you said. I think you whispered the word “fake”.
Something something is fake. Did I hear it wrong?

Still not talking. Oh, well.

After that, I reached for the Orphan and closed her eyes. *I... killed her.* I was surprised to see the serene look on her face. *I killed her.* I expected it to be contorted with regret. *I killed her!*

I secretly searched for the red box in the girl's luggage. The Gray Wolf was nearby, but she was completely oblivious to what I was doing. I quickly removed the contents of the memento box and put them in my suitcase—a perfume bottle, umbilical cord, a portrait. It felt like I had killed my sister. It was a nightmare. I had killed a complete stranger to save my sister. I was sure I was going to hell. Suddenly I felt horrified.

Outside the train, the Empress screamed. When we got out, we saw the Dead running and trying to escape. The Vassal was shocked, but not me, considering what he mumbled earlier. “This is bad. An incident like this will draw people.”

I realized then that the Dead was hiding something.

So I ran along the tracks with Kujou to catch the fleeing man.

As I ran, tears formed in my eyes and drifted in the wind. I was so terrified of the girl's peaceful expression. Why are we killing each other? Why are we following orders from adults and killing strangers for the sake of our loved ones? We're told to fight for our families, for our country, and take each other's lives. That girl—the Orphan—was also a spy, just like me, working under orders from adults. It was like she and I were mirror images of each other, friend and foe. I was the girl's reflection in a dirty mirror. I killed a girl who was just like me, killed her with my own hands. We are children of the same country, Sauville. But this kind of thing is happening all over the world. The Great War is not over yet. It's been barely six years since the war ended. Six years is not enough time to put it all behind us. A mad Sodom that changed our lives forever. A great storm... It's not over yet. We're still bleeding in this country!

What?

I was restless the whole time I was talking?

I was looking at the door repeatedly as if waiting for someone to arrive?

...

.....

.....

Of course not.

You're mistaken, Miss Gray Wolf.

Come quickly. Come help me, Marquis de Blois. Save my bloody self and return my sister to me!

Epilogue: Siblings

The room was quiet.

From the corridor came the patter of the detectives' leather shoes and Kazuya giving Inspector Blois a piece of his mind, but in this room, no one said a word. There were only two people staring at each other—a small, regal girl with golden hair hanging down to the floor like an unraveled silk turban, and a noble youth with gray eyes, glinting sharply with fierce emotions.

A moment later, the young man glanced at the door again, as though waiting for someone to arrive.

“They should be here to pick you up soon,” Victorique said. “I can tell.”

“I see. So you’ve got it all figured out, Miss Gray Wolf.” Gideon smiled, showing his composure. Victorique frowned a little. “The girl that Marquis Albert de Blois fathered from a dancer. A fearsome golden pup, with the blood of a Gray Wolf and this country’s nobility. The ultimate weapon of the Old World.”

“I’m not the Old World’s weapon. I am me.”

“I don’t know about that. Sometimes children have no choice but to follow their parent’s wishes.”

“I am me,” Victorique repeated softly.

A chilling silence filled the space. The thin wisp of smoke drifting from the white ceramic pipe to the ceiling wobbled slightly. Victorique’s tiny hand must have trembled.

“Whatever,” Gideon dismissed. “Marquis de Blois will decide what to do with you. Anyway, you know how I did it, don’t you? The Orphan’s wet glass, a sign that it was cold, while the Vassal’s wasn’t. When I introduced the poison in the supposedly-empty glass. Why she was fine the first time she took a sip, but started groaning in pain the second time.”

Victorique gave a small smile. “You planted poison in the glass. Only one glass was chilled. First you put poison at the bottom and froze it, then you put some water on top of the poison and froze that too. That way, even

if you held it upside down, the poison would not fall out and the glass would appear empty.”

“Correct.”

“The Orphan was fine on the first sip because the frozen poison had not yet thawed. When it *did* eventually thaw out, it mixed with the water, and she took a second sip. The poison was in the glass, not in the bowl of raisins. Therefore, the person who brought the glass was the culprit—you.”

“Indeed, Miss Gray Wolf. Your deduction is spot-on.” Gideon smiled. He sat back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. “The introduction I gave at the masquerade ball was true. My sister is being held captive by the King of the Underworld—your father, Marquis Albert de Blois. If I failed my mission, he would not return her safely. I found an article about my sister in a newspaper on the floor of the compartment. A missing Miss Legrant. When I saw that, I knew I couldn’t reveal my real name. Hence the weird introduction.”

“I see...”

“I received Marquis de Blois’ instructions onboard the Old Masquerade, in the communications room. I had to find and kill the passenger who had the memento box, and take it.”

“...”

“I had no idea that the enemy spy was just a girl, about the same age as my sister, so frightened by her pursuer. I didn’t consider that possibility. I always thought that the people I had to fight were adults. But she was the same as me, young.”

“...”

“I killed her. But I had to. To save my sister. I had no other choice!” Gideon cried. He stared at Victorique’s tiny face.

Victorique held his gaze. The white wisp of smoke from her pipe drifted straight to the ceiling, unwavering.

“But I have an attendant,” she said in her husky voice.

“The Vassal, yes.”

“My attendant is incredibly stupid. He doesn’t notice a spider crawling on his face, he’s tone-deaf, he’s an awful dancer, and a brute. But in my hour of need, he always comes to my rescue.”

“Yeah. He climbed out of the window and ran across the roof.”

“Yes.” Victorique nodded, wearing a sour look. Her chubby cheeks puffed up even more.

“I guess he’s the same as me. I would do anything for my sister. She’s my only family.”

“Ahuh. Kujou is willing to brave any danger to lend a helping hand. He doesn’t care about the risks. There’s a part of him that wants to protect those who are weaker than him. That may be the philosophy of the men of his country, a strangely-shaped island nation in the distant Orient seas. I think someone’s trying to turn him into that kind of man. And maybe he sees me, a friend he met in a distant land, as something extremely important that he should go to such lengths to help.”

“Hmm.”

“Kujou doesn’t consider his life important. But there is one more thing I believe about that man. Even if it were to save his own skin, even if it were to save me, he would never kill an innocent person.”

“...”

“Even an enemy spy who shared different goals. He would not kill a girl to save me. If I had to guess, he would rather die with me.”

“But—”

“Yes. On the battlefield, grown men would denounce it as ‘weakness’, something that would be recorded as a ‘wrong choice’ by future historians. But Kujou has this kind of ‘right weakness’ that I call virtuosity.”

“But...”

“He’s a weak and virtuous man. And the Gray Wolf admires him for that.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“H-How could I?!”

Victorique pulled her jaw back a little and cast her gaze down. But her expression was as cold as ever, with the haughty impassivity characteristic of aristocrats. Her green eyes gleamed like jewels.

A thin wisp of smoke wafted from her pipe.

The bustle of late afternoon rolled in through the window. Hooves clattered on the pavement. An accordionist was playing music. The sound of ladies’ conversation slowly passed by.

Gideon’s lips quivered faintly. “Do you think I was wrong, Gray Wolf?” He studied his palms, as though they were bloody. Tears welled up in his

eyes, his lips trembling.

Victorique shook her head. “That is for you to decide. You wished only to save your sister, even if it meant getting your own hands dirty, even if it meant taking the lives of others. And you did it. I suppose that, too, could be called love. Something completely alien to me, but seems to be in everyone’s heart. The warmest, most precious, but most dangerous emotion of all. Invisible to the eye, but certainly exists.”

“But whether I was right or wrong, I would never be arrested. Because your father, Marquis de Blois—that is, the Ministry of the Occult—is behind this case. Soon I will be released. Hear that?”

Footsteps were approaching down the corridor. Victorique’s tiny, lovely ears twitched.

“Gideon,” Victorique said. “I solved the case, revealing you to be the murderer. But not because I wanted you arrested. I did it to remove my attendant from the list of suspects. So the police don’t falsely accuse him. Being an oriental student makes him an easy target for the adults of this country to pin the crime on him.”

“I see. So you also helped your friend. Not by running on the roof of a train, nor by shooting a gun, but by using your formidable intellect. But does your friend know that?”

“He doesn’t need to know. It’s just how friendships work.”

“Then I guess you’re aware of it.” Gideon chuckled.

“Aware of what?” Victorique groused.

“The warmest, most precious, but most dangerous emotion of all. Invisible, but it’s there. Love. What’s between me and my sister. What’s between you and that boy. It has to be love.”

“...”

“Your face is red.”

“No, it’s not. The albatross is here. You should be getting released soon.”

The door opened, and Inspector Blois entered.

Inspector Blois had a bitter look on his face. “No accolades this time,” he said. “What a shame. Gideon Legrant, you’re free to go. A carriage is here to pick you up.”

“So I’m in the clear?” Gideon got up and started walking with the bouncy gait of a gazelle.

“Of course not,” Inspector Blois said tiredly.

“But someone’s here to pick me up.”

Detectives appeared from the corridor and exchanged looks. The Ministry of the Occult probably called, forcing them to release Gideon. Amid the awkward and heavy atmosphere, Gideon casually put his things—the contents of Jupiter Roget’s memento box, the umbilical cord, portrait, perfume bottle—into his suitcase and gently closed it. Victorique watched him silently.

“Are you ready? Then let’s go. There’s a carriage on the ground floor. I hear your sister is in it too. Come on, hurry up!”

“Yes, sir!” Without turning around, Gideon left.

Victorique watched wordlessly as he moved away. The thin smoke rising from her pipe wavered faintly.

“Lumberjack, wait!”

A low voice stopped Gideon. He looked over his shoulder. Victorique regarded his face, glowing with relief that the crisis had passed. She got up from her chair and trotted toward him.

“What is it?” Gideon asked.

“You were a delightful traveling companion. It’s a shame that you have to leave, so I thought I’d share some parting words.”

“Hmm?”

Inspector Blois looked grimly into his sister’s face. He knew better than anyone that his sister would not feel anything about a traveling companion. Gideon stared back at Victorique with a puzzled look on his face.

“Bring your ears closer,” she said. “Crouch down. I can’t reach.”

“O-Okay.” Gideon crouched down and brought his ear close to Victorique’s lips.

“Run,” Victorique murmured in the sinister, husky voice of an old woman.

“...What?” Gideon whispered back. “Why? I’m free now. I can go home with my sister. Why do I have to run?”

“You’re free only if you got the memento box, no?”

Gideon’s complexion slowly changed. “What do you mean?”

“That box you killed the Orphan to get is a fake one. That’s what I whispered in the Orphan’s ear before she passed away. I told her to rest

assured. That the memento she took from the monastery is a dummy. That's why she looked relieved when she died."

"What?!"

"I pretended not to notice you stealing the contents of the box from the Orphan's handbag because it was a fake. I wanted to confirm who the Orphan's enemy was. The real memento box was already taken out of the monastery by Cordelia Gallo. What you have is an identical imitation that she left behind. An examination would immediately reveal that. The handwriting is different from Jupiter's own, and the portrait is probably new, not from his childhood. It's only a matter of time before they learn the truth, Gideon."

"No way..." Gideon's face gradually turned pale.

Inspector Blois was waiting impatiently in the corridor.

"Wh-What do I do?"

"Run, Hare!"

"What?"

"Marquis Albert de Blois and the Ministry of the Occult set this whole thing up, but there's no rule that says the children can't win. Run away. Run as far as you can, Hare. Together with your sister."

"Hare? What are you talking about?"

"There was a case a long time ago. Shortly before the Great War, there were poor hares—boys and girls—who were gnawed to death by adults. They died one after another on a sinking luxury liner, without knowing why. Innocent children, about the same age as us. Anyway, just run. I'll see you around, Gideon. Someone's kind brother whose hands are stained with blood. Young, cursed Lumberjack, who goes on chopping down trees for his sister."

Gideon staggered to his feet, staring down at Victorique. Fear and anxiety flashed in his gray eyes. But a moment later, he gave a firm and determined nod.

Handing his suitcase to Inspector Blois, Gideon made an effort to walk with a spring in his steps. He even whistled as he skipped.

"Well, aren't we in a good mood?" the inspector muttered.

Right before he could turn the corner, Gideon looked back and gave Victorique a small, grateful nod.

Once he was out of sight, Victorique trotted back to the room. She sat in her chair for a while, alone. Her beauty seemed to block the passage of time itself. It looked as if a luxurious porcelain doll was left propped up in a chair for ten or even a hundred years. A strange tranquility filled the room.

Smoke drifted from her pipe. Her golden hair cascaded down.

“Have I made even a little progress?” Victorique mumbled to herself in her low, husky voice.

The words of her older brother Grevil replayed in her ears. That nasty voice that had mocked his young, terrifying sister.

It was shortly after the case which resulted in Grevil sporting his hair in the shape of a cannon.

“You’re an ignorant princess locked in a tower.”

“You have no power to put anyone in despair.”

“Because the little Gray Wolf has never loved anyone.”

She was much smaller then and much less human than she was now. A little Gray Wolf who terrorized people, locked up in a tower, burying her brilliant mind in a sea of books.

She recalled the unforgettable words whispered by Cordelia, the mother wolf, as she climbed up the tower and handed her a gold coin pendant.

“Mother loves you. Even when we’re apart, I will always come to you in your hour of need. Victorique, my beloved daughter.”

The days she spent wandering through a sea of books, searching for the meaning of her mother’s words. The anxiety that filled her tiny heart, and the longing for her mother. And the curious, foreign boy hailing from the orient.

“Have I made a little bit of progress in solving the mystery of a lifetime?” she murmured in a trembling voice. “To unmasking this cold and burning emotion inside my chest that seems to be constantly hidden under a veil.”

She sat still for a while.

A thin wisp of smoke wafted from her pipe, and her golden hair rustled. A while later, Victorique stood up and opened the window with both hands.

Outside stood department stores and brick buildings. The paved streets were filled with people. Parked in front of the police station was a carriage, from which adults in suits emerged and greeted Gideon. Gideon smiled and

said something, pointing to the suitcase he had asked Inspector Blois to carry. The young man then cheerfully got on the carriage.

Victorique, looking down from a window far above, mumbled, “Run.” The door on the other side of the carriage swung open. “Run, hare!”

Gideon stepped out silently first, followed by a petite girl of about seventeen with waist-length, black hair. Holding each other’s hands tightly, they ran through the busy street. An oncoming car blared its horn at them, and a horse-drawn carriage almost ran them over.

The adults still didn’t seem to realize their escape. The men in suits and Inspector Blois were talking about something.

A moment later...

Amid the blaring horns and the jolly accordion music, a man in a suit glanced back at the carriage, pointed, and shouted something.

Men scattered in all directions, running. Victorique could hear them shouting Gideon’s name all the way up to the fourth-floor window. The young man gripped his sister’s pale hand tight and raced through the crowded streets as fast as possible. The men chased after him like hounds, but a carriage blocked them. The two kept running, huddled close like lovers. The girl’s long, black hair fluttered, and then slowly darkened like a terrifying nightmare at dawn, until eventually they turned a corner and vanished like bubbles.

“Run, hare,” Victorique said. Her icy, emotionless face twisted faintly. “History is moving. A storm will come once more. But never, ever let the adults catch you. You must live for each other, and no one else.”

Meanwhile...

Behind the Saubreme police department building, there was a different commotion.

“No! Where are you taking me?!”

“Calm down, and be quiet. Stay... still... Someone’s here to pick you up.”

Two young detectives were dragging along a middle-aged woman, who introduced herself as Empress Britannia. One was pinning her from behind and the other holding her legs.

Hearing the commotion from the corridor, Kazuya went downstairs and peered into the dim back door, where a black car had just pulled up. Three

men in white coats opened the door and stepped out. There was a pungent smell of disinfectant. Doctors, Kazuya realized.

The men took a rolled-up vermilion carpet from the car's trunk, and with a familiar motion, laid it all the way to the back door of the police station. When Empress Britannia noticed the carpet and the three men in white standing by the car, she gasped and stopped thrashing about. The detectives let go of her, and she fixed her disheveled hair and lifted her chin with dignity.

"I see they're here," she said.

The men bowed at the waist simultaneously.

"We've come to pick you up, Empress. Please return to the Kingdom of Krehadl."

"Your subjects are waiting for you."

"And the king too, of course."

After saying what sounded like practiced lines, one of them opened the door of the car. The Empress lifted her chin and strode across the carpet.

"Imagine our surprise when we received a call," a detective whispered to Kazuya. "Asked if we had Empress Britannia in our custody."

"Are they..."

"Doctors," he said in an exasperated tone. "They're used to the lady escaping the hospital and causing a commotion somewhere, claiming to be Empress Britannia."

The other detective looked a little sad as he watched the middle-aged woman get into the car. There were fresh fingernail marks on his face.

"Apparently, she was a famous stage actress before the war. She was especially great as Empress of the Sirens. Then she lost her son during the Great War. Her only son served in the war, but never came home. That's when she went crazy. Her husband has already remarried, but he still pays for her stay at a luxurious hospital."

He wiped the blood dripping from his cheeks with the palm of his hand. "I served in the Sauvville army until six years ago. Luckily, I came back in one piece, but if I didn't, my mom could've ended up like her. The thought is unbearable."

The door closed. The car window slowly opened, and Empress Britannia smiled broadly as she waved to Kazuya and the detectives standing by the stations' back door. Kazuya searched for signs of madness behind her smile.

She looked sad, but kind-hearted nonetheless. She appeared as gentle as she did last night in the Old Masquerade, not at all crazy.

Is she really crazy? Kazuya wondered. Or perhaps she's acting crazy to drown her sorrows.

The car drove off. Kazuya and the detectives bowed as they watched it go.

When the Orphan was crying, the Empress stayed with her. Comforted her. And the Lumberjack said she was like a mother.

The car moved farther and farther away.

A mother who lost her son, once a famous stage actress. Empress Britannia, the poor siren...

At that moment, distant shouts of "They took off!" and "Gideon!" came from the front of the station. Kazuya turned his gaze to the direction of the voices.

Right. My mother cried too when I left for a faraway land. She cried from sadness...

The car with the Empress slowly turned the corner and disappeared.

As Kazuya started for the front of the station, another group of detectives appeared from the back door, escorting the Dead. Surrounded by five muscular detectives, he was walking in quiet resignation.

A young man in a driver's uniform was walking next to them, inclining his head. "I didn't expect to see the boss here. I was sure the driver killed him, and he got arrested. I thought I was coming here to identify him. Then I entered the room and saw the boss instead. I thought I was seeing a ghost."

"I totally understand. I thought the charred body in the car belonged to Jason Neal, the coal-mining tycoon."

"So the charred corpse belonged to the missing driver?"

"Maybe."

"Did the boss kill him?" The driver glanced at the Dead in horror.

A large police van approached, and the Dead—Jason Neal, the mining tycoon—was tossed inside. The man glanced at Kazuya.

His eyes were empty. Eyes as blank as the dead's.

One of the detectives poked Kazuya. "As soon as that driver entered the room, he shouted 'Boss!' Imagine my surprise. The Dead was actually the mining king, who was supposed to be dead."

“What do you mean?” Kazuya asked, astonished.

The words that Victorique had spoken about the dead’s soul residing in the body of the living, and the inside being different from the outside, came to his mind.

The detective shrugged. “Apparently, Jason Neal tried to disappear by pretending to be dead, burning his car along with his driver and made it seem like it was his body. He was on the run with his fortune when he got mixed up in another case. That wad of cash was his entire fortune.”

“Really? That money?”

“Yeah. The man was actually on the verge of bankruptcy. The age of electricity is upon us. You don’t make much money owning a coal mine. He became rich at a young age and rose through the business world, but his dream ends here.”

Kazuya recalled one of the gossips that the Empress shared. She said that the mining tycoon was actually on the verge of bankruptcy. The door of the van closed, and it slowly drove off in the opposite direction to the car carrying Empress Britannia.

Kazuya stood still as he watched the car go. A cool autumn breeze blew, gently ruffling his jet-black hair.

The mining tycoon faked his death, assumed a different identity, and went on the run. He tried to live another life. Like a dead soul entering the body of a living.

A tiny voice called his name. A low voice, easily recognizable no matter how distant and faintly it was. It was Victorique. Kazuya turned around.

She came trotting down the stone stairs. Her tulip-shaped green dress, its hem meticulously trimmed with crocheted black lace, billowed softly. Her pointy silver boots pattered on the floor. Her golden hair fluttered, glistening like the mane of some mysterious creature.

The Dead replacing the living, the Empress protected by a dream world, and the Lumberjack searching for his sister. I can’t believe it. Except for the Orphan, all the stories they shared last night at the weird masquerade turned out to be true.

Victorique was watching him curiously. Kazuya dashed to her side.

As he neared, she said, “Gideon has escaped.” She sounded satisfied for some reason, smoking her pipe softly.

“What?! Now that you mention it, I *did* hear shouting about someone taking off.”

“It’s complicated. I’ll explain it to you on the way home. It’s a lot of trouble, and I’d prefer to keep it to myself, but you won’t stop bombarding me with questions until I explain, so I have no choice but to verbalize it to you.”

“Well, yeah... The Empress and the Dead were taken away just now. I’ll tell you what happened, too.”

“Very well.”

Kazuya squeezed Victorique’s hand and started walking down the corridor of the police station. He called out to Inspector Blois, who was returning from the entrance.

“We’re headed back to the academy.”

“Okay...” The inspector was breathing hard. “They got away,” he mumbled, forcing himself to strike a pose. “The first train in the afternoon should be leaving Charles de Gilet station soon. If you take that, you’ll be back at St. Marguerite Academy by evening.”

“Okay. See you around.”

“Not getting accolades is truly unfortunate, but I don’t have much of a choice this time,” Inspector Blois muttered regretfully.

Victorique exhaled sharply in response.

Outside the police station’s brick building, the afternoon streets were bustling with people—fashionable ladies with parasols, gentlemen in silk hats, businessmen in suits. Passenger carriages clattered along, and cars sped past, blaring their horns. There was a cavalry on horseback. An accordionist playing cheerful songs. Scruffy street urchins begging for coins at the corner.

Kazuya was relieved to finally be able to return to St. Marguerite Academy. It was hard to believe that only a few days had passed since he left the academy alone with his luggage. At the time, he was heartbroken at the thought of never seeing Victorique again. But after rescuing her, he could now return to the village with her.

Kazuya whistled to hail a carriage, and Victorique moaned in admiration. The first time they went out together, Victorique was surprised when he stopped a carriage with a whistle, bettering her opinion on him.

Now she seemed to be a little more used to going out than she was on their first adventure.

Back then, a weekend outing turned into a dangerous adventure on the cruise ship Queen Berry. Kazuya and Victorique joined forces to solve the case and returned to St. Marguerite Academy together. And today too, they were heading back hand in hand. Suppressing his excitement, Kazuya entered the carriage with Victorique.

“To the Charles de Gilet station,” Kazuya said in fluent French.

“Got it.” The coachman nodded, and whipped the horse into motion. The carriage rocked as it drove off.

Carriages and cars mingled in the traffic. Ladies were also divided into two groups: one dressed in the glamorous old-fashioned style, with their hair tied up, corsets around their waists, and those in the new century’s fashions, with modern short hair and loose-fitting dresses. A middle-aged gentleman in a silk hat and walking stick and a young businessman bumped into each other, neither side giving way.

The occult and science, the old and the new, nostalgia and longing for a new era, coexisted in the boisterous streets of Saubreme. Six years had passed since the horrific Great War that involved countries from all over the globe, but traces of the conflict still lay heavy in people’s hearts. People were still hurting, looking back, reflecting on the past and what they had lost, yet still longing for a new era, dreaming of a supposedly wonderful future.

Outside the carriage window, the past, the present, and the future intermingled.

Victorique’s tiny face looked a little perplexed as she studied the purple ring on her finger grimly.

A precious ring given to her by her mother.

For Victorique, her mother was the past and Kazuya was the future. Both extremely important. Hot and cold, mysterious things that opened a big hole in her heart.

“We couldn’t have been born in stranger times,” Victorique murmured as she leaned against the window.

“Hmm?” Kazuya smiled.

“The old and the new. Everything is in conflict, and the future looks chaotic. A storm came once, but I have a feeling that a second storm is

coming soon. I can smell the wind. The damp wind before a storm. A wind with a mixture of gunpowder smoke. An unwelcome and frightening sign of change.”

“Yeah.” Kazuya nodded nervously.

Victorique smoked her pipe languidly. Her expression was as icy as ever, with the haughty impassivity characteristic of aristocrats. But her eyes, green as a deep lake, quivered faintly.

“Chaos fills the world once more. In the not-too-distant future, a storm will come again, ushering a great change, and the world will be reconstructed. A massive change that the world will seem like a different place. Everything will undergo a transformation—some will grow old and disappear, some will be elevated to legends, some countries will become new powers, history will be distorted for the benefit of others.”

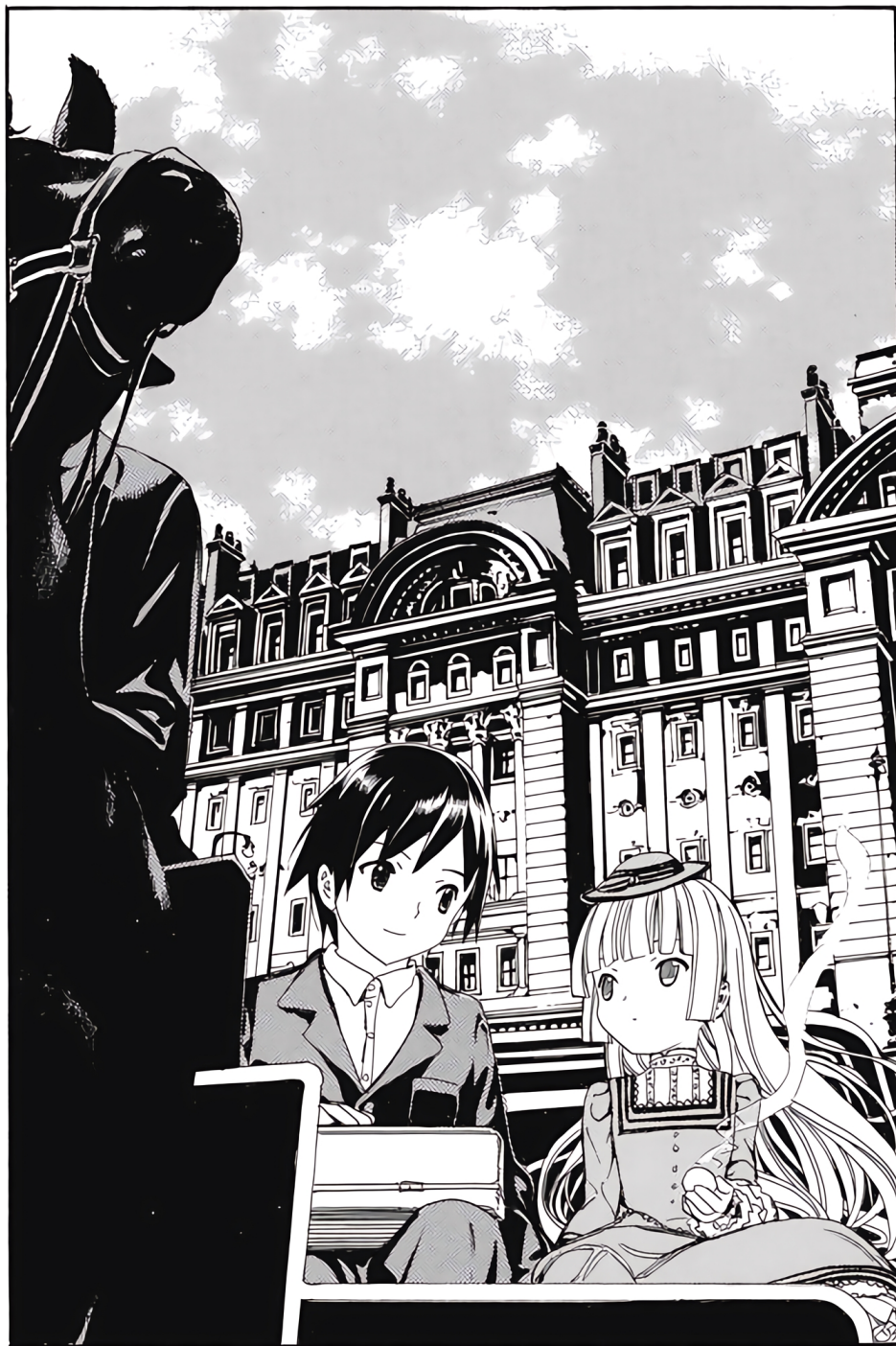
“Since you’re a Gray Wolf, it must be true,” Kazuya said quietly. “But no matter what happens, if you have a trusted friend by your side, you’ll be fine. You can protect each other.”

“Y-Yes...” Victorique blinked repeatedly, caught off-guard, and went silent.

Kazuya peered into her face and smiled. “We’ll never be apart, no matter what.”

“Ahuh.” Maintaining an icy expression, Victorique nodded firmly. “Yes. We’ll never be apart.”

They stared at each other.



Kazuya was smiling. Victorique was wearing her usual expression, cheeks puffed up.

The carriage rocked as it drove through the hubbub of Saubreme, and eventually arrived at the Charles de Gilet train station. The station was bustling, too. Porters in red uniforms were running around. Travelers, ladies and their children, ice-cream vendors, and station staff hurried past. Kazuya walked through the station, holding Victorique's hand tightly so they wouldn't get separated.

The express train to the village where St. Marguerite Academy was located was about to depart.

Kazuya pointed to the platform. "That's it!"

Victorique nodded. Standing still, they held each other's gaze.

A gentle smile bloomed on Kazuya's face. "We promised to go home together," he whispered softly.

He blushed a little as he recalled their intimacy when they worked together to fire the gun from the driver's cab of the Old Masquerade.

Victorique nodded solemnly, unashamed. "Of course."

She regarded Kazuya with gleaming, jewel-like eyes as he turned redder and redder, studying his crimson face curiously.

A whistle pealed.

"Oh, no. We have to get on that train. Let's go!"

"Let us."

Holding each other's hands tight, they scurried across the platform.

For a moment, Victorique's magnificent golden hair, blown by a pleasant autumn breeze, curled softly around Kazuya's slim figure like gentle magic.

Gosick - Volume 06

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